Breaking The Silence Down

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Prologue

Shropshire, Late 1970's

Summer had come early to the Shropshire town of Greenock, perched as it was on the lofty bank that overlooked the Severn valley and the undulating land southeast of Shrewsbury, and Leonie Symonds set her face against the dry wind that swirled dust past the half-timbered Guildhall. Down the narrow street she could see a woman struggle with her hat in the wind that rattled the iron sign beside the ancient Raven Inn.

A farmer in his dirty jeep wished her good day but the wind snatched at his words and he was left to spit on the pavement as he turned his vehicle toward his distant farm. Thunder was brewing, but the lightning was still many miles to the east.

Inside, the Raven Inn was cool and Richard Apthone, with an unaccustomed mug of ale, settled nervously in a corner, folding his town-styled jacket neatly beside him. The silence which had greeted his entrance filled slowly, and soon the conversation had resumed its leisurely pace.

"I canna' think w'eer 'es gwun," he heard a voice say. The room was shadowed darkly, stained by almost a century of smoke, soot from the open fire and the centuries old oak timbers, and Apthone felt uneasy.

Dominoes rattled against a dark oak table. "Whad'n you bin doin' at my house?" a voice asked.

"Him bin doin' summat!"

In the sky, the thunder had begun, relieving some of Apthone's tension, and he settled down to slowly drink his mug of teak-coloured ale.

No rain came, and Leonie waited for half an hour outside the Inn under a darkening sky before walking away. She possessed no courage to follow Apthone further. He was a Probationary teacher, his spotty face fresh from University, while she was thirty-two and divorced. He had left her, and his mocking laugh still pained.

Slowly, Leonie ambled along the narrow street to the ruins of the Priory. Greenock owed its existence to the Cluniac foundation, and the town had continued its quiet, if at times prosperous, existence after the Reformation in the sixteenth century, a huddle of half-timbered and limestone buildings, until modern development had ruined its charm. The old town, clustered on four narrow streets to the west and south of the Priory and nurtured by the medieval prosperity of the monks and the local trade in corn and wool, had been conquered by new red-brick estates whose occupiers and owners owed little, if anything, to the long and rich heritage of the town or the land around. The old, cloistered community, bred through centuries of local toil, tied to the land or the local trades of such a small market town, was dying out. But a few remained, unchanged in speech or gesture, and sometimes a few of the surviving men would gather to talk in their strange dialect in the dark of the Raven Inn. From a small town famed for its stonemasons, Greenock had grown haphazardly to hold over a thousand souls.

The sky above the Priory ruins darkened again, and Leonie sat on the dry grass by the high remains of the south transept, listening to the distant rumble of articulated lorries that skimmed against the west of the town along the main road that joined somewhere to somewhere else.

Her childhood had been strict and Catholic and she found a form of comfort among the ruins. Its destruction seemed to lessen her own feelings of rejection and for several minutes she felt saddened as if the stones were giving up to her, after all the intervening centuries, all the intervening prayers and plainsong that had seeped into them, year-by-year, day-by-day and DivineOffice-by-DivineOffice. Once, as a child, she had felt the call of her God, the holy promise of a religious vocation, but the years drew away the calling as she fulfilled the ambitions of her parents at University and through marriage. Perhaps she had been wrong, and she touched the rough stone of the transept by way of expiation. Perhaps her God was punishing her for her desertion of His cause. For years a vague need had suffused her, a longing whose fulfillment would somehow imbue her life with meaning and perhaps even joy.

Her marriage had failed, her affair with Richard seemed over and she began to realize that it was human affection she craved. For an instant she longed to rest in the divine love of her God's human and crucified Son, but her faith was broken, chipped away by intellectual doubts and the desires of the flesh.

She sat for nearly half an hour amid the petriochor of storm, trying to desire nothing. She was unsuccessful, and found her thoughts drifting between the selfishness of Apthone and the kindness of Diane. She had dreamt of Diane many times but after each dream was ashamed and as if to punish herself for this betrayed, she clung to Apthone. She despised herself for her dependence and there had been days when she appeared cold and cynical towards him until her generosity of spirit

triumphed. Diane Dietz was her most intimate friend – a colleague in whom she had confided after her divorce – but the friendship had become both her blessing and her curse. The more she confided, the more she wanted to confide simply to preserve the special moments when they seemed to share the same understanding, feel the same feelings and perhaps nurture the same desire.

But the stones were no longer singing for her and she walked away from the Priory, her sadness and her dreams.

I.

Leonie was late again. She did her best to appear unhurried and failed. Hume 4, her first class of the day, were all present among the desks and overturned chairs and she fumbled with her books while waiting for the tumult to subside.

"Cor, Miss!" shouted one of her girls whose leg warmers were singularly inappropriate considering the weather, "I like your dress."

Leonie smiled. The early morning Sun of summer cast shadows over the nearby fields and for an instant she forgot Apthone's harsh words, the spot on her chin and her recent divorce.

The class soon settled to their work and she enjoyed watching them while they toiled with their essay. Somewhere, along the road that joined the large Comprehensive school to the small town of Greenock, a noisy mower trimmed drought-burned grass.

Soon, too soon for Leonie, the lesson was over and she watched while the children fled at the sound of the bell to add more noise to the corridor outside. The cloudless sky over the fields near Windmill Hill made her happy and she wandered contently along the corridors to the Staff Room. Apthone stood by the door. She smiled and went toward him but he was embarrassed by the attention and walked away haughtily down the stairs. 'Look,' she remembered he had said, 'I enjoy sleeping with you – but as for anything else, forget it.'

Suddenly, her happiness disappeared like sun behind thick cloud.

"Are you alright, Leonie?" a gentle voice asked her. There seemed such warmth of understanding there, in her eyes, that Leonie blushed and in her confusion allowed Diane to guide her, like a lost child, into the Staff Room and onto a chair. She was brought a cup of coffee, and biscuits, and when Diane moved away to collect some books from a chair by the window, Leonie followed her every movement. Diane was a sylph, and Leonie envied her. She felt herself unattractive – her hips were too large, her breasts were different sizes and too big for her stature and she had wrinkles around her eyes. Diane's skin was fair, unblemished and soft and she experienced a sudden desire to touch it.

By the time Diane returned, she had composed herself sufficiently to ask, "How is your husband?"

"Off on one of his jaunts again. He's training to cycle from Land's End to John O'Groats in three days. Silly bugger!" As she laughed her small breasts wobbled, just a little.

Leonie lit a cigarette and nervously blew the smoke away.

"Is it Richard?" Diane asked softly.

"Yes." It was only half a lie. Diane's physical nearness was making her tremble and she felt ashamed. Part of her wanted to touch Diane's long hair. It was soft and flaxen and swayed slightly in the breeze from the window.

There was anguish on Leonie's face and Diane said, "Would you like me to have a word with Richard?"

"No, please!" She placed a restraining hand on Diane's arm but almost as soon took it away.

She felt disgusted that Diane might be disgusted with her desire. She forced herself to think about other things.

"Are you going to Morgan's party tonight?" Diane asked, intruding upon Leonie's morbid thoughts.

"No – I don't think so."

"That's a pity," Diane said sincerely. "I wanted you to go."

Perplexed but pleased, an innocent Leonie said, "why?"

"Because I like being with you. It won't be the same without you there." She touched Leonie's face very gently with her hand.

Diane's touch astonished her and her emotions were too contradictory for her to do anything but mumble incoherently as Diane excused herself and strode purposefully through the huddle of men around the door.

The lean figure of Emlyn Thomas, the Headmaster, whom the children perhaps unkindly called Crater Face, ambled toward Leonie but his progress was interrupted by Thumper Watts.

Watts' nickname had its genesis in his first few years at the school when, discipline still being of the Wass Hill grind sort when errant pupils were forced to run up the 1 in 5 hill that joined the northern edge of Greenock to the medieval hamlet of Wass, he was fond of clipping unruly boys around their ears.

"Mr. Thomas," said Thumper sarcastically, "I'm sending Howell to you – again!"

"Oh? What has the poor lad done now?"

"Only tried to set fire to Reynolds' hair."

Thomas wrung his hands like an elderly cleric. "I'll give the lad a good talking to, mark my words, I will."

"He wants his balls cut off if you ask me," mumbled Watts.

"What?"

"I was just saying, a talk is what he needs."

"Yes, my feeling exactly!" Satisfied, he sidled away, completely forgetting abut his intention to talk to Leonie.

Watts sat next to her instead. "Stupid idiot!' he said in frustration, and winked at Leonie.

Leonie shivered. It was not that she disliked Watts – on the contrary, he was one of the few male members of the teaching staff whom she respected. But his physical presence she found intimidating, as if his sheer size overawed. Sometimes she found it hard to believe he was Head of Physics Department for his build seemed more suitable to a more athletic profession and it was easy for her to imagine him shot putting or tossing the cabre in some isolated glen.

Morgan came toward them, dramatically shaking her head so her frizzled read hair moulded itself decoratively around her shoulders.

"Gosh! It's hot!" she said.

Leonie smiled at her, but the gesture was ignored as Morgan sat next to Watts. Leonie did not mind – the sun was searing what remained of the green from the grass of the school playing fields and she stood by the window, watching sheep graze on Windmill Hill. It would have been a peaceful scene – the fields of pasture, the scattered sheep, the twisting lane enclosed by untrimmed hedge – except for the noise of the children. Sometimes the din from the school could be heard in the centrer of Greenock, almost a mile to the south.

Leonie rested her head in her hands, her face alternatively possessed of sorrow and joy. She watched a kestrel as it hovered briefly above the lane before swooping down to snatch its prey.

Around her, the staff room slowly filled with noise, and she did not see Diane looking at her from the sun shadow by the door.

Diane watched Leonie intently for some time. Leonie's feelings seemed a part of her, as if they were related closely by reason of birth, and she felt sad because of the selfish desire which captivated men like Apthone and which drove them to use a woman's body while abusing the warmth and sensitivity that a woman possessed. For an instant there existed in Diane a strong desire to protect Leonie, to interfere dramatically in her life and free her from Apthone. But more than that, Diane Dietz, a teacher of seven years standing and hitherto contented, was jealous of Apthone. She wanted Leonie all to herself and in a mood of jealous rage that might have made her hit Apthone or driven her to reveal her secret hopes to Leonie, she ran crying from the room, down the stairs and out into the bare and unrelenting sun.

II.

Richard Apthone was ignoring her again. He stood in the corner of Morgan's garishly furnished room talking jovially to he scantily clad hostess while conservatively dressed Leonie skulked in the one empty corner. The loud music displeased her, as did the wine-soaked and incestuous throng of teachers, and she regretted she had come. Watts was staring at her while pretending to listen to Diane whose thin dress hid very little. Leonie blushed.

Morgan left Apthone and Leonie took advantage of the anonymity of the close-pressed crowd to approach him.

"I must speak with you," she said.

Apthone sighed, then swayed like a drunken clown. "You are."

"Alone, please."

"Can't it wait? I'm enjoying myself."

"No, it can't wait." She was almost crying.

"Can I stay tonight?" he whispered, attempting to affect concern. His face, however, did not mould itself as his calculating

mind intended, and he leered. Apthone was lanky in build with a face like a frost-broken gargoyle.

"I'm pregnant," Leonie said softly.

Apthone stared blankly at the wall, then looked nervously around. No one else seemed to have heard. "But," he stuttered, "you said you took precautions."

"I'm sorry, but – "

"My god!" he rasped, "are you sure it's mine?"

The insult made her cry. "Look," he said for Watts was staring at them, "it's not my problem. For god's sake woman, stop crying!"

She did not, and he walked away to gawk at Diane but she rudely pushed past him. Leonie's crying was making him nervous and he smiled drunkenly at Watts.

"Come outside a moment, will you?" said Watts.

Apthone blinked, but followed him.

"You alright, Leonie?" Diane asked.

"Yes, I'm fine," she lied.

Instinctively, Diane embraced her, but their contact was brief, broken by Leonie.

Diane smiled. "We'd both be better off without men."

"What do you mean?" asked Leonie sharply and instantly regretted it.

Diane shrugged. "They cause more problems than they solve."

For nearly a minute they stood facing each other, both expectant, nervous and unsure and both wishing for some gesture or word that might somehow make tangible their feelings. Diane made to speak but Leonie, confused by her own suddenly conflicting feelings, smiled nervously and withdrew to her corner.

Diane, full of rage at herself for her own timidity, muttered a long stream of obscene curses which the loud music drowned, and by the time her courage had returned, Watts was talking to Leonie. She drank two glasses of wine in quick succession and barged between them.

"Apthone gone then?" she asked pre-emptively.

Watts smiled mischievously. "He's outside. Having a little sleep. Too much to drink if you ask me." He drank from his can of beer, then burped. "Well, I'm off. Can I give either of you a lift?"

"No thanks," an embarrassed Leonie asked.

"Diane?"

"Leonie has invited me back for coffee. Thanks, anyway."

Watts affected another burp and loped away, stooping to go through the door.

Before Leonie could speak, Diane said, "I'm going to take you home, make you a hot drink and get you to tell me all about what's upset you so much."

"But –"

"Forget Richard. He's probably so drunk he won't even know you've gone." Briefly, she held Leonie's hand. "I really care for you and hate seeing you unhappy."

"You are kind," said Leonie softly.

Leonie's house bore some resemblance to her life: slightly disorganized but planned with the best of intentions. It was a large house, bounded by gardens which were beginning to grow wild, and carried its mantle of children well. Toys were neatly stored in the playroom and the expensive furnishings had escaped largely untouched by melting ice cream, spilled, sticky drinks, small dirty hands and impetuous ravaging feet. Its size and luxury had, at one time, been of some solace to Leonie, but it had become empty and a constant reminder of what she thought of as her marital incompetence. Her children were asleep when she and Diane arrived and the young girl who had minded her children during her absence was soon gone, leaving the two women alone. Diane made coffee and they sat, almost touching, on the leather sofa in the sitting room.

"You seem very unhappy," Diane said as a small circle of subdued light enclosed them among the humid darkness of the room.

"I feel so peaceful with you."

"I'm glad."

Very quietly, she said, "I'm so confused."

Diane's face was gentle and serene and Leonie smiled awkwardly before saying, "I'm going to have Richard's baby."

"Oh my darling!" Their embrace was natural but brief and Diane gently wiped away Leonie's tears.

"I don't know what to do. It is such a mess. No one cares."

"I do," said Diane. "I care very much."

"But – " She turned her head away.

"Leonie," Diane began is a whisper afraid that the beauty of the moment might be lost and afraid of herself, "I find you very attractive."

"Diane – I …."

"Don't say anything, please." She stroked Leonie's face with her hand, and then kissed her, very gently. Leonie made no move to stop her and Diane kissed her again.

Leonie was not afraid, only pleased because Diane possessed the courage to express with words and deeds what she herself had felt but would never have dared to express in any way.

"I need you, Leonie," she heard Diane whisper.

The simple words ceased to be simple: they were a magickal invokation, a chant of power and possessed for Leonie, in that instant of her troubled life, an almost sacred, childhood quality.

Nothing was real for her except Diane – her warm breath, her perfume, the softness of her touch and the enfolding pressure of her body. She felt she wanted to be enveloped by Diane's warmth.

"I love your beauty," Diane was saying. Diane's touch was gentle, as gentle as Leonie had imagined, once, that it might be and she did not tense nor speak words of discouragement when Diane caressed her breasts.

There was gentleness in Diane's kisses and touch that Leonie had never experienced before – a kind of empathy as if Diane was not taking but sharing. She clung to Diane, fearing the moments might end. But the moments did not end as she feared but changed instead into physical passion.

"Diane", she said slowly and precisely, "please stay with me tonight."

Slowly, hand in hand, they walked the stairs to bed.

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Light mist obscured the river Severn and the surrounding fields, and Leonie stared at the tops of the trees. Soon, the warmth of the summer sun would disperse the mist and the mystery it seemed to bring, returning the harsh contours, bleak colours, and breaking the silence down.

Leonie smiled. She liked her bedroom with its view of the Severn, the trees full of birds and fields and found it easy to forget she lived on the edge of a town.

Diane was still asleep in her bed and there was an innocent joy in Leonie as she watched her lover. Everything she could see seemed more beautiful because of Diane, as if her very presence added a precious quality to the day. She wanted to lie down beside her, feel the warmth and softness of her body.

Diane stretched, sleepy, and Leonie accepted the refuge of her arms.

"How do you feel?" Diane asked.

"A little guilty, I suppose. But happy!"

"You are lovely!"

"Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"Is this your…what I – "

Diane smiled. "You mean is this the first time I have made love with a woman?"

Shyly, Leonie said, "Yes."

She smiled. "I was very nervous last night – I almost didn't do anything."

"I'm glad you did."

"If I had been wrong – " Diane shrugged.

"What made you try?"

"You mean," said Diane playfully, "apart from your beautiful body?"

"Seriously, though."

"Something about the way you looked at me, I suppose."

"I used to dream about you a lot. Very naughty dreams."

"And now your dreams have come true."

"I feel really funny."

"Well, you make me laugh!" Diane kissed her, and then said, "you mean you can't really believe it's happened?"

"In a way, yes. But I also feel I'm not the same person I was yesterday. I can't explain."

Diane smiled and rested her head on Leonie's breasts. "A woman's breasts are the softest pillow in the world."

"You make me happy," Leonie said as she stroked Diane's hair. "I never thought I could be happy again."

The sound of Leonie's children near the bedroom door surprised them, and Diane dressed quickly, kissed her lover saying, "You make me happy as well!" and left.

Leonie ran down the stairs to wave goodbye, but the car had gone and she was left to return slowly to the perfumed emptiness of her room.

Apthone did not seem important to her anymore. The half-resented need, which had bound her to him, had been broken by Diane and as she dressed she found reasons for hating him. Even the growing child in her womb held no terror; she would have an abortion and then Apthone would be removed from her life. She would be free at last, and could give her life to Diane whose gentle words of love during the long humid night had brought her tears of joy. There was a quality about Diane's love and passion that she had never experienced before, and it pleased her.

The mist over the river was dispersing and she watched it disappear with a mixture of happiness and loss. It would always remind her of her first night with Diane – yet it would be good to feel the hot sun on her body, warming it.

Languid, she lay on her bed until a sudden guilt made her jump up to attend to the tasks of her day, suppressing the thought she would be murdering her unborn child for the sake for the pleasures of her body and the love of a woman. Defiantly, she took the crucifix from the wall of her room and threw it under the bed.

III.

Diane had closed the kitchen door of their bungalow in the tourist town of Church Stretton when her husband appeared wobbling like a drunken duck on his cleated cycling shoes. He was lean, burnt from the repeated exposure to the sun, wind and rain, with cropped hair as befitted a racing cyclist – even an amateur one.

"Well?" he asked, feigning annoyance.

"Well what?" She stared at him holding her head to one side.

"Have a good time?"

"As a matter of fact – yes!" Immediately, she became defensive. "You off out to play, then?"

He looked pained – and not a little funny in his tight fitting cycling jumper and shorts. The long, very close fitting shorts were superbly comfortable on a bicycle, but off it, they made a grown man look ridiculous and a little obscene.

"Don't tell me – 'your training schedule' demands it."

"As a matter of fact, yes."

"You think more of your rotten bikes than you do of me!"

"That's a ridiculous and inaccurate thing to say."

"But true."

"No, it is not."

"Aren't you jealous?" she demanded.

"About what?" he looked at his watch.

"I'm having an affair," she announced.

"That's nice," he replied without feeling.

"Don't you care?"

"I know you are joking," he smiled.

"Oh, we are the superior man, aren't we?" she mocked.

Suddenly she was angry and he took advantage of her preoccupation with her emotion to slip out the door. She saw him take his expensive cycle from the garage, resisted the temptation to rush out and kick it, and watched him pedal down the road. The mask of calm, which she used in her role of teacher returned slowly, helped by the morning stillness and the gathering mist, and sat down in her bedroom to write her diary.

Her desire for her own children had long ago been vanquished by the natural facts of her genetics and the need which bound her to women, and her innate love for children found its poignant expression through the medium of her profession. She loved the mostly gentle unfolding of a child from the often shy and awkward first-year into a young adult, aware of themselves and mostly possessed of a youthful zeal, and she made no distinction between those who were intellectually inclined and those who were naturally gifted with their hands.

To her, each child was unique, and she cared for them all – not out of sentiment or because she believed it was morally right, but because it was in her nature to do so.

Yet she sought some satisfaction in life beyond the undoubted rewards of her profession and the undeniable lesser rewards of being married to a cycling fanatic whose idea of a good day was to thrash himself to exhaustion in a fifty mile trial – preferable over hilly terrain – talk about it for hours afterwards and fall asleep in the evening reading a cycling magazine or a technical report on the strength of the latest titanium axle. Their sitting room cabinet was full of medal he had won, but after five years it was all predictably boring.

She had had no affairs with men, for she found them either too shallow in the head or too uncaring. Their tenderness, she knew, was a ploy to obtain a woman's body and for the most part they had no interest in her as a person.

Three years ago, her experiences in adolescence, her hopeful expectations and secret desires, had caused her to deliberately seek out the company of women. Her liaisons had been brief, and unsatisfying, but they produced a stronger longing for what could be – a relationship based on mutual desire for love and affection and a mutual, instinctive understanding of the kind she felt was impossible with men.

Her thoughts carried her pen. "Maybe," she wrote in her diary as a schoolgirl might, "I have found my answer at last. There seems to be something special between us."

Said laid the book aside to watch from her window the mist swirl slowly over the hills that breasted the road to her school fifteen miles to the east. The sun cast a beautiful light between the ground mist and the higher fog that obscured the hilltops, and she regretted her lack of artistic talent. To paint such a light would be divine – but all she had ever done was compose a few pieces of schoolgirl music. The diary was some solace, and she hid it, as she had done for years among the clothes in her drawer, before writing a letter to Leonie. The act of writing inspired her, as the misty light had done, and her letter became one of love.

She folded the letter neatly, sealing it within a perfumed envelope and placed it carefully if nervously in her handbag. Its existence pleased her, and she sang happily while preparing her breakfast. The breakfast was soon over and, showered and changed, she departed early for school. The mist thinned and dispersed as her car carried her over Hazler Hill and along under the blue sky on the country road that joined Stretton and its glacial, moor covered Mynd, to the ancient settlement of Greenock.

Apthone's rusty vehicle was already in the empty car park. The thought of meeting the adolescent with the gait of Quasimodo

and the meanness of Genghis Khan did not please her, but even Apthone with his spotty face and fetid breath could not diminish the joy she still felt.

Soon, she would be with Leonie again.

The staff room was empty – except for Apthone. His face was bruised and he bore a black eye.

He also limped and his expression been less venomous, she might have laughed.

"Walked into a wall, then?" she asked.

He sneered, and the expression suited him. It also caused his face some pain. "I fell of my motorcycle," he lied.

"I didn't know you had one."

"Oh, yes! It's an old…."

She left him grimacing to mark a few of her pupil's exercise books. After a while, the marking bored her and laying her handbag on top of the pile of books as she nearly always did, she left to make herself a cup of coffee. A few children dawdled by the front door below. Apthone was grinning maliciously, as well as his face would allow, when she returned.

He sat next to her. "Your little secret is safe with me," he drooled.

Diane looked at him coldly. "What do you mean?"

He produced her precious letter. "That's mine!" She made to snatch it but was too slow. "You bastard! You've no right to go into my handbag!" She attempted to slap his face be he gripped her arm.

"We wouldn't like this to become general knowledge now, would we?"

"You bastard!"

"Listen," he lisped, "I'll keep quiet about this on one condition."

"Go to hell!"

"I'm sure Mr. Thomas would be most interested in this. Or the School Governors. Like to be dismissed would you? For being a lesbian." He said the word with relish, and let her arm go.

"You do me a favor – I do you a favor. Can't say fairer than that can I now?"

"Could I have my letter back please?" She demanded.

"Of course!" he smiled. "After you sleep with me." He stood up dramatically, placing the letter in his jacket pocket.

Angry, Diane stood in front of him. "I don't care what you tell others!"

"Is that so?" he smirked.

"No one will believe you!"

"Willing to find out, are we? If that's what you want."

She moved toward him, but he pushed her away. "Think about it!" he said before turning and almost running out the door.

Diane was too angry to cry. She also hated herself for being too physically weak to take her letter by force and give Apthone what he so richly deserved. She thought of telephoning her husband but he would still be pedaling furiously around the roads and she would be incapable of explaining why she had written the letter in the first place.

Several members of staff arrived simultaneously and she bade them all good morning in her customary cheerful manner. Apthone reappeared but ignored her. Morgan arrived to greet all the men – she fussed a little over Apthone's wounds, and Apthone's laugh made Diane feel sick. At the door she collided with Watts. Despite his size and often oafish manner, he held her gently..

"Can't stand it any longer, then?" he asked jovially.

She saw Apthone look at Watts and turn immediately away, his face pale and intuitively she understood.

"I've left something in my car," she said by way of explanation.

Watts winked at her and she escaped through the door, down the stairs and into the warm air of morning.

Upstairs, Apthone would be polluting the room with his stench.

IV.

The heat of the sun surprised her, and Diane moved her chair into the shadow. Her class was restless, for no speck of white appeared in the sky.

"Miss," Rachael the raven-haired asked while Bryan behind her pulled monster faces for attention and the rest sulked in the heat, "How did you derive the solution?" She pointed to the mathematical scrawl on the blackboard.

Diane frowned. It was not easy teaching lower sixth form mathematics on a humid day toward the end of the summer term. Good natured Bryan, his cropped hair belying the astute brain beneath, had started moaning to add sound to his impression when Rachael turned and rapped his knuckles with her ruler.

"Grow up will you?" she mumbled. The sixth form was exempt from school uniform and as she turned, framed from the side by a shaft of sun, Diane could see her breasts through the dress. The fleeting sight brought a physical sensation of which she felt ashamed, but she smiled calmly at Rachael until their eyes met. For a second, perhaps more, each understood each other. Diane saw Rachael smile, then blush.

Bryan stuck out his tongue, but the beautiful Rachael with the mature body ignored him. Through the glass in the door he caught sight of Apthone shuffling along the corridor.

"The bells! The bells!" he intoned, hunching himself.

Inspired, Diane went up to him, patted his gently on the head and sail, "There, there. You'll feel better in a minute."

Bryan did not mind the laughter. "Ah! Esmeralda!" he chuckled as Diane returned to the blackboard. His lurch was curtailed by the toneless buzzer in the corridor.

Rachael pretended to write in her exercise book until she and Diane were alone. "Miss," she asked, "can you help me with this?"

"I hope so Rachael!"

She was leaning over Rachael's shoulder studying the neatly written equations. Rachael made no move away and Diane could smell slight perfume. Part of her moved to kiss Rachael's cheek, but another pulled away. It was a battle her respectable half nearly lost.

"There," she pointed, moving her face away, "you've written 'y' instead of 'x'. No wonder you cannot solve the equation."

"Oh, how silly of me!" chided Rachael as Diane smiled and escaped through the door.

Leonie was waiting, shyly, by the stairs to the Staff Room, uncertain how to respond. Around them, the childish mayhem continued.

"You stink!" one small freckled face said to another.

"Don't."

"Do! So there!"

"You smell more than me!"

"Don't you ever wash, pongy?"

Impulsively, Diane held out her hand for Leonie, then withdrew it. "Can I see you tonight?"

she whispered as they climbed the stairs.

"I would like that Diane," she smiled briefly. Then she quickened her pace to become enclosed in the relative peace of the childfree Staff Room.

A gaggle of young and mostly female teachers surrounded the repulsive Apthone who was heroically recounting the story of his accident, and Diane sneered at them before sitting beside Watts.

"I think," she said, "you've made him look better."

He smiled at her understanding. "Dry bones can hurt no one."

"Unless they are moved by evil intent."

"And are they?"

"Who knows?" said Diane embarrassed. Suddenly, she smiled. "You've never liked him have you?"

Gruffly, he said, "Met this sort before. He shouldn't be a teacher. He'll get some girl in trouble, believe you me."

"Didn't you once teach Judo?"

"No, lass, Karate. Was competitive, once. Black belt, Third Dan, and all that. It's quite easy to kill someone, you know, without leaving a mark."

"Could you teach me?"

"To kill someone?"

"No, of course not!" she laughed, nervously. "Just a few basic things. How long would it take?"

"To learn anything useful – maybe a few weeks. Why?"

Diane shrugged. "Just an idea. These are troubled times." To lessen his suspicion, she said, "what don't you start classes here – self defense for women? I would certainly attend."

"Maybe. Doubt if old doubting Thomas would agree, though."

"You could always try."

"I'll think about it."

The expression on Watts' face – full of warmth and love – surprised and shocked Diane and she excused herself hurriedly to rush down the stairs and thread her way through the throng of children in the corridor to a room when she could be alone.

After the noise of the school, the room seemed possessed of the quietness of a church and she sat for a long time by the window trying to recapture the lost innocence of the warm Autumn days of years ago during her first weeks at the school. The promise of those days, the spontaneous joys, seemed to have been sucked away by the drab reality of adults and their narrow-minded schemes.

V.

Diane's husband was engrossed in lubricating the chain of one of his bikes in the kitchen when she arrived, late, from work.

"I was attacked on the way home," she said airily.

"That's nice." He did not look up.

"And I'm being blackmailed."

"Hmmm."

"Don't you care about me?"

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing." She looked at the well-polished racing cycle. "Is your bike more important?"

He stood up. "Are you feeling alright?"

"No I'm not! Not that you care!" She went to kick his cycle but he moved it in time.

"Careful!" he admonished. "That's a 753 frame!"

"So what?"

Exasperated, he leaned the cycle gently against the wall. "Do you want to talk then?"

"Heaven forbid! What's the point?"

"Personally, I cannot see any. When you are in an emotional mood like this."

Diane stared at him. She felt resentful. For years they had lived uncomplicated almost separate lives: hers dedicated to teaching; his to cycling. His employment was a means to the end of cycle racing whereas hers had become the most important part of her life. They had quarreled sometimes, but had existed quite happily without the intimacy of emotions she craved. Several times in the years of their marriage when the emotional bareness of their relationship had become unbearable, she

had sought the soft scented comfort of a woman. But the affairs had been brief and had filled her with guilt and a little self-loathing. She had enjoyed, more than she at times liked to admit to herself, the physical part of her relationships, but she had never found a woman to compliment her – one with whom she could share intimate personal details, one with whom she could relax and be herself. Someone to share the pleasures of companionship and someone with whom she could make love because such love making would be an extension of their friendship – the ultimate tribute of a relationship. Yet despite all the guilt, the doubts, the self-loathing and the fear of discovery, her desire for female intimacy remained, promising so much that was unfulfilled.

She had existed in a sort of twilight zone between her wishes and the reality of her marriage, accepting her married life because she had grown used to it and because there had always been times when her husband would allow himself to become emotionally involved – when he showed by words and deeds that he loved and needed her. But increasingly, he had become, it seemed, absorbed in his racing as she had become absorbed in her secret desires and the joy of teaching and the two passions never met. Once she had watched him at a time trial – fifty miles on a cold and very early summer morning – but she had found it so boring, watching rider speed after another at one minute intervals then stand around drinking tea for several hours until all had completed the course and the winner was declared. She never went again.

The cycle he had bought her lay in the shed, ridden once and forgotten, and her loneliness bred desire.

An obsession seemed to drive her husband. He had no time for fine ideas, thoughts or emotions. He simple loved life – and hated to be bothered by thinking or feeling guilty about it. He was almost satiric in the enjoyment he derived from his existence. He had no worries – except about his bicycles – and would begin each day as though no other existed. Every problem – every one of her problems – would be met with a smile (sometimes a laugh) and the promise that everything would be all right. At first, she had loved his energy and enthusiasm.

Nothing daunted him; he was cheerful and full of vitality and even the knowledge that she could not bear his children did not daunt. "Oh well," he had said, "there is no use worrying about a fact of Nature. Looks like a beautiful evening – we could go for a walk ..."

Slowly, very slowly, she had begun to poison herself with resentment, but it was only her love for Leonie that made her realize it.

She stood staring at her husband. She wanted him to come and embrace her; to tell her that he loved and needed her, to offer to stay at home with her for a few hours instead of riding off into the warm, humid evening. But all he did was look at his watch and check the pressure in his tubular tires.

He was smiling and, as she nearly always did, she allowed her good nature to triumph over her own desires.

"Go on!" she smiled and kissed him. "I don't want to keep you."

Soon, she was alone again in the silence of their house. The prospect of the evening excited her and she was shaking when she picked up the telephone. Apthone was in his lodgings, as she knew he might be, and she smiled satanically when she said: "Richard? Diane. Can you meet me tonight?" She heard the glee in his voice.

"If you bring the letter – you can have what you want." She could almost hear him drooling.

"Meet me a half past nine by the Devil's Mouth on the Burway."

The hours passed slowly, much to her consternation, until the sun of late evening cast long shadows of the Stretton hills. The town was quiet as she drove toward the Burway. Several tourists, distinguished by the cameras, idled along the streets and by the crossroads that divided the Burway road from the tree-lined Sandford Avenue, a group of youths in leather jackets lingered, shouting at cars as they passed.

A van heading for the town passed her as she steered the car slowly over the cattle grid boundary between town and National Trust land, and she drove in low gear along the step sheep-strewn hill. The road dropped precipitously to her right into the tourist trap of Cardingmill Valley, but she had little desire to dwell on the scene, poignant though it was in the soft light of beginning dusk. The road wound sharply, following the old droving route.

Fifty years ago, few people had walked the moors. But with the laying of the road and the spread of the tourist-idea, swarms wore away, inch by inch, the thin soil among the bracken and heather and fern. Many were the summer days when Diane had seen long lines of cars ascending the road, spreading their contents and noise. She loved the Long Mynd and found something almost mystical and sacred in walking along its top while wild wind scattered her hair and drove snow into her face. From its varying steep sides, worn by glacier, water and frost, she could see high Caer Caradoc with its hill-fort, the limestone escarpment of Wenlock Edge, the plain around Shrewsbury with the volcanic mound of the Wrekin to the east, and to the south the mottled contours of Nordy Bank. On a clear day, to the west, legend said Snowdon could be seen.

The road climbed steadily until she passed by the long conical spur of Devil's Mouth. A large gravel and scree patch, shadowed by early morning sun, had been set aside for cars and straddled the brief but level plateau below the spur. To the south, the hill fell steeply to Townbrook before rising to the heights of Yearlet Hill. To the north, the land dropped steadily for several

hundred yards, blotched by sheep, heather, fern and grass, then steeply fell to Carding Mill valley, cut by fast flowing water, before rising to Haddon Hill.

No cars were parked by the road and no one stood on the shale top of Devil's Mouth to gaze upon the Shropshire view. Diane left her car and waited. A few sheep, their necks blotched with blue dye, tore the vegetation nearby and a slight wind stirred while no white cloud broke

the blue above. Quite unexpectedly, Diane felt sick. She began to shake, her mouth went dry and she felt very cold. But quickly the fear and panic subsided.

She heard Apthone before she saw him. His motorcycle was loud amid the windy silence of the hills and she watched him swagger toward her car, his helmet in his hand. He lounged against her car, affecting boredom in his dirty jacket and jeans.

"Have you the letter?" she asked.

A pale and skinny hand grasped her letter and he smiled.

"Right," she said coldly, "I think over there in the heather would be fine." She pointed, as he turned to look she withdrew the knife she had hidden in her sleeve.

It was not courage, but anger, which made her swiftly press it to his neck. Before Apthone could react, she snatched the letter.

"Bother me again you little runt," she said coldly suppressing her anger, "and I will use this. Understand?"

Apthone tried to smile, and she pressed the tip of the knife into the skin of his neck. He flinched.

'Understand?" she repeated and he nodded. "Now go and stand over there," she demanded.

Apthone obeyed and she calmly walked toward his motorcycle and plunged the knife into the tire. He made no move toward her and she smiled at him before returning to her car. Soon, the figure of Apthone disappeared from the rearview mirror of her car.

Less than a quarter of an hour later, her reaction came. In the kitchen of her house she began to laugh. Apthone was no threat to her – and her hours of worry, anger, fear and frustration seemed pointless. He was a spoiled child with the body of a man.

Pleased with herself, she was making herself a special brew of tea in celebration when she heard a car stop outside. By the light of dusk she could see Watts slowly ease his bulk from the enclosing steel of the car.

"Just came to see if you were alright," he said as she opened the door.

"Why shouldn't I be?"

He shrugged. "Just a feeling. Didn't want to intrude."

Feeling guilty about her rudeness, she said, "Would you like some tea?"

"Yes, fine."

Watts was inspecting he shelves of books in the sitting room when she returned with the tray.

"I didn't know that you were interested in musical composition," he said.

"Only a little."

He returned the book, evidently satisfied. "There is a lot about each other we don't know."

"Isn't that true of everyone?"

"Your husband not here?"

"He's riding most of the night – preparation for a 24 hour time trial or something."

"You must get lonely."

"No."

"Does a lot of cycling, your husband?"

"Quite a lot, yes." She was beginning to feel annoyed by his presence and personal questions.

"Seen anything of Leonie?"

"I don't mean to be rude – "

"But you'd like me to go on. Can I see you tomorrow night?"

"I'm going out."

"With Leonie?"

"How did – " She watched him, but he continued to smile. "Yes."

"How about the day after?"

"I don't know."

He had stood up to leave when she said, "Are you in love with Leonie?"

"Why look at me with eyes askance, Shropshire filly, and cruelly flee, thinking me bereft of sense? A bridle I could place around your neck."

"You're an intriguing man." She laughed.

"Why? Because I mis-quote Greek poetry or because – "

He looked at her but she turned away. He was blushing and the unexpected appearance of this expression of his feeling perplexed Diane. He walked toward her and touched her face, very gently, with his large, calloused hand before lifting her to her feet.

"I have always loved you." He said.

She smiled nervously. "I never guessed until today."

He kissed her forehead, but she moved away. "Please, don't."

"Diane – "

"Please, I want you to go."

"I'm sorry if I have offended you." He was not angry.

"No. Not really. It's just that I'm a little confused. I don't know what to think."

He smiled, and then kissed her on the cheek. "I can wait."

"Oh why did you have to tell me now!"

"Things just happen in their own time."

She did not resist his kiss, but it was not what she wanted and she began to feel angry.

"Don't, please!" she said, pulling away.

He let her go. "All that matters is that I love you."

"And Leonie!" she taunted.

"Maybe. I thought you would understand." He touched her face with his hand but she was torn between apathy and anger and knocked it away.

"I would like you to go now," she said, staring at the floor.

He shrugged. "If that's what you want."

"Yes."

"Shall I see you tomorrow? Just a thought. Maybe we could – "

"I don't think so."

"Well, I'd best be off then." He did not move.

"Yes."

He started to move toward her, then stopped, bowed fairly gracefully considering his build, and winked. Before she could

respond, he had closed the door behind him and for several seconds she stood staring. No physical desire had possessed her, and all she could think of was Leonie.

Outside, darkness stirred lazily, as it does on warm summer days treading past mid-summer. In the shadows of a tree across the road, a freshly dress Apthone lurked, smiling to himself as he watched Watt depart. Slowly, in his rusty car, he drove away to post his poisoned letter.

VI.

The church bell, its chimes carried in the breeze, had tolled eleven when Diane's doorbell rang. The breeze did little to alter the humidity or Diane's mood and languidly in her nightdress she opened the door, half-expecting Watts. It was Apthone who leered at her.

"Push off!" she shouted.

His face crumpled and his breath smelled of beer. "I came to apologize Diane."

"Go away or I'll scream."

"Now that wouldn't," he said staring at her breasts, "be nice, would it?"

"Don't touch me!"

He laughed, and touched her breast. She screamed briefly, for he hit her in the stomach with his fist before throwing her to the floor. In the struggle, her nightdress tore, exposing her breasts. The sight increased Apthone's drunken lust and he began to tear at her thin covering while pinning her to the ground with his body and covering her mouth with his other hand.

She struggled, but his drunken strength was strong while he fumbled with his trousers.

Desperate and determined, she freed herself sufficiently to grasp his shoe, which had come loose during the struggle. Her blows to his head were hard and insistent and he made to grasp her arm, the action sufficient for Diane to free herself from the weight of his body. Apthone was trying to stand when, with the fury of her anger fed by her desire to not be humiliated, she kicked his face. She did not feel the blow, but it knocked Apthone over and she swiped the heel of the shoe three times into his face.

"You bastard! You bastard!" she screamed as another of her blows broke his nose. Apthone struggled to his feet, his face covered in blood. He lurched toward her and she threw the shoe at him before running into the kitchen. He followed, staggering.

The carving knife she wielded was long, with a blade of surgical steel and she hissed like a woman possessed.

"Get out or I'll kill you!"

Apthone, trying to stop his bleeding nose with his hand, stepped back.

Diane's eyes glowed. "I'd enjoy killing you, you pathetic bastard!"

She was intoxicated with the primal power of her Viking ancestors and no longer felt unsure.

Her education, her upbringing, all the finer feelings of her life, even her love of the innocence of children, were banished in that moment and she perceived with a terrible clarity the passionate realness of life. Its colour was red, its expression blood.

"Come on!" she taunted him, her knife-holding knuckles white. "Come and get me you ugly little bastard!"

But Apthone the coward retreated to the door to flee toward the dark and Diane had closed and locked the door before she dropped the knife in horror at herself.

Blood spattered her wall; Apthone's shoe was by the door that for five years she had closed on her way to work. She began to shiver and had moved to the kitchen to retch into the sink when the realization of her will became a fact in her consciousness. She knew with an irrefutable arrogance born from the moments of fear and anger, that she and she alone was responsible for herself and her feelings. She possessed not only the consciousness to decide but also the will to make the decision possible. Everything was clear to her: there were no more questions; no more doubts that undermined and made her weak.

The insight of understanding made her laugh; then cry. Apthone was gone but there would be other Apthone's somewhere imposing themselves and polluting with their warped will and desire. The thought made her angry and she began to understand as she made herself some tea in the neon brightness of her freshly painted and appliance strewn kitchen, that she need never again allow herself to be weak or dominated. The civilization to which she belonged had nurtured her, softly shielding her and she had been playing a doomed society's role. Apthone's attempted rape, her own anger, the fear and humiliation that had possessed her, had broken through this appearance to the real essence of the woman beyond. She was a unique individual and did not have to conform to someone else's set of rules or ideas.

Calmly, she collected a dressing gown before drinking her tea. She thought, momentarily, about telephoning the Police – but that would merely confirm and reinforce the role. Apthone had condemned himself by his act and she wanted personal revenge. If her understanding signified anything it was this – Apthone was her problem to solve. And she, Diane Dietz, lately a weak, emotional woman tied to feelings of insecurity and guilt as she had been tied to the idea of marriage, could do anything because she had begun to discover the liberation of self.

Among the clothes that lay in her drawer lay the revolver. It was a .38 Service issue revolver and had lain in its box since her birthday over fifteen years ago. She had fired it once, she remembered, as a young girl…

> Sun dappled the front lawn through the summer clouds as her father held her had steady. On the rear lawn, her mother played tennis while the sun dried the large Georgian house of rain.
>
> "Gently now," he advised, "squeeze the trigger."
>
> The retort was not as loud as she had imagined and she closed her eyes as she squeezed.
>
> "My dear Diane," remonstrated her father, twirling his mustache, "it is rather bad form to close one's eyes."
>
> She squinted at the target nailed to a tree and fired twice in rapid succession. After a brief inspection her father, hobbling on his stick, returned to slap her on the back.
>
> "Well done, I must say! One bull, other just a touch to the left."

Next month, she had received the gun, in a presentation box, as a birthday gift. It had been one of her father's few mementoes from the war.

She inspected it carefully, as her father had shown her all those years ago. Oil clung to it and she wiped some away, lightly, with the small cloth before loading the chambers. It was lighter that she remembered.

In the dark outside, the church bell struck the quarter hour.

VII.

No lights showed in Morgan's house and Diane drove slowly past. The gun felt heavy in her jacket pocket but she ignored it, watching the street of terraced houses carefully. No one stirred, among the houses or parked cars and no vehicle passed her.

Her visit to Apthone's lodgings had been brief and had she been a few minutes earlier she might have cornered her prey. The landlady was apologetic – Apthone had rushed in, and hastily departed on his repaired motorcycle. Diane had smiled nicely at the old woman and left.

A few of the terraced houses showed lights and she parked near one, walking the few yards to Morgan's garishly painted door. Nearby two cat waileds in the clear humid night.

The response to her knocking was slow; a stair light, then footsteps to creak the stairs. Morgan, wrapped in a coat, held the door on a chain.

"Yes?" she asked brusquely.

"Is Richard here?"

"No."

"I must speak to him."

Morgan's voice was sympathetic. "He's not here."

Diane peer around the door and what she saw shocked her. "May I come in?"

"Look," Morgan said with a sigh, "I'm very tired. I really want to go back to sleep. I don't mean to be rude but – "

"You'd rather I went?"

"Yes."

"Fine. I can see why." She turned and walked briskly to her car. Inside, she held the gun, momentarily, then returned it wearily to her pocket. Her quest for vengeance had been eclipsed by what she had seen and, slowly at first, she began to cry. Propped against Morgan's stairs had been her husband's expensive bicycle.

It was the betrayal of trust that hurt the most, and she was alternatively angry, sad and a little overjoyed. She did not mind the physical fact of her husband's adultery as much as she minded the deceit: there was obviously nothing, no emotional ties of a sensitive kind, no moral obligation, that bound her to her husband, and the thought of revealing to him the dreadful shame of

Apthone's attack made her sadder still. It would be impossible to reveal it, now, because she was free and had only to rely on herself to experience a new strength. Nothing bound her and she drove slowly toward Leonie's house.

She sat in the car outside the house for some time, listening to a Vivaldi cassette. The music calmed her and she found the trees, weird Celtic deities by the strange sodium lights, quite beautiful. Behind the widely spaced houses, the river Severn flowed in darkness and drought.

The single headlight was blinding and Diane shielded her eyes. The screeching tires and crash startled her, just a little, and she walked without much feeling toward the scene. A motorcyclist had collided with the front of a stationary van and the impact had tossed the rider into the air to collide with a concrete lamppost.

The rider, his helmet missing, was groaning and as Diane approached she recognized Apthone.

She did not smile but withdrew the gun from the pocket of her jacket while Apthone, with his bloody face and twisted limbs, stared incomprehendingly.

"Diane" he whispered, coughing blood, "help me."

She aimed the gun, easing the hammer back with her thumb. Apthone, horrified, shook his head in desperation while Diane aimed the weapon at his head. He tried to wriggle away, but his broken body refused to obey his commands of thought and Diane gently eased the hammer back. There was no owl to haunt with its screech as she turned toward her lover's house – only the sound of people running, a car braking to halt in the road.

"Quick!" someone shouted as she stood by Leonie's door. "Call an ambulance!" A large garden hid her from the road.

Leonie was quick to answer the chimes. "Diane!" She hugged her friend. Come in. I hoped you'd come." She looked around. "I thought I heard a noise."

"Yes," smiled Diane. "There's been some sort of accident."

"Hadn't we better go and see if we can help?"

"I don't think so. There seems to be enough people there already. We would probably only get in the way."

Leonie strained to see, but the road was thirty yards away. "You're probably right." She led Diane into the brightness. "You look awful!"

"Thanks!" said Diane.

"No, honestly, I didn't mean – "

"It's alright," smiled Diane, holding Leonie's hand. The touch pleased both, if for slightly different reasons. "Any chance of some coffee?"

"Actually, there's some on. Just in case you called."

The kitchen was all stainless steel and pine, but the subdued light and Leonie's presence made Diane feel welcome and warmly disposed toward the world. She could forget Apthone the twisted, the deceiving adultery of her husband and the problem diversion of Watts.

"Can I stay the night?" she asked.

"Oh Diane, you don't have to ask!" Shyly she handed Diane some coffee from the percolator.

"I feel this is as much your home now as mine."

The words, the manner of their delivery and the gentle vulnerability of their speaker brought euphoria to Diane. She forgot all her problems and embraced and kissed Leonie. Her love felt like a physical pain.

"Do you mind if I tell you something?"

"Nothing would make me happier."

In the sitting room, Diane lay on the sofa, her head in Leonie's lap while Leonie stroked her hair.

"I'm leaving my husband."

"Not because of me?" asked Leonie, her voice trembling.

"Partly. But partly because he is having an affair with Morgan."

"I'm sorry," said Leonie sincerely. "I thought your marriage was fine."

"These things happen."

"Are you sure it's not my fault?"

"If anyone is to blame it is probably Morgan the man-eater."

"I'm sorry," repeated Leonie.

"It's for the best. It was inevitable anyway, as things were developing."

"What will you do?"

Diane sighed. She felt content, lying in Leonie's lap while her lover with sensuous breasts stroked he hair. Apthone was irrelevant, Watts was not important. Even her husband, warm and sweaty in Morgan's scented bed, no longer held any power to mould her emotions.

Tonight, she could sleep with Leonie and in the morning she would watch the mist over the river while sun warmed the green richness of earth. Then, with Leonie, to school where her treasured pupils would be waiting and where she would try and infuse into them some of the special meanings which were entwinned through life. The day of work done, she could come home with Leonie to their house, play awhile with the children before the dark of night brought the peace of contented and blissful post-Sapphic sleep.

"Leonie," she whispered.

"Yes?" there was expectation in her voice.

"I hope you don't think I'm imposing myself on you."

"Even if you were, I would be glad."

"I do love you."

"And I – " Leonie closed her eyes, but the reluctance remained. "Diane," she said by way of expiation, "please take me to bed."

VIII.

The morning was beautiful as the night had been and Diane stared out of the window. The post dawn mist eddied slowly around the trees that clung to the grassy banks of the Severn, and along the path a hundred yards below the house that followed the river for many a winding mile, a solitary man in shorts ran, his stride like a gazelle. He vaulted the low stile of the fence that separated the two small and shrub-strewn fields of cows, and Diane watched him run bare-chested and lithe until he disappeared into the mist. No cars spoiled the quiet of dawn.

Naked Leonie joined her at the window and for several minutes both stood, arm in arm, watching their minute part of the world change as low sun bore down to disperse the mists of late night. It was one of those intense and rare magical moments that lovers share when no words are needed and where the two halves seem united in empathy and expectation. A spell bound them through both the gentle scented lusciousness of their bodies and the fusion of their wordless thought. Both felt and understood the natural extension of the maturing relationship that their lovemaking made; they were equal and reversed the roles as they and their other half required. Giving and receiving, in turn as their feelings and desires changed with the passing of the hours. For them, in the two passionate nights shared, there had been no distinction between submission and dominance – between recipient and receiver – as there had been no guilt of submission or defeat. Instead, a mutual response to unspoken desire. A sensitivity of not only touch but mood that had hitherto been lacking in all their relations with men; a feminine giving tempered by a very natural and gentle feminine mastery. But above all, a genuine sharing.

For Diane the long night had been both a liberation and a release; Leonie was the woman whom for many years she had sought, and with her all problems were resolved. She neither needed nor desired anything else.

"I need no one but you, Leonie," she said.

Leonie's kiss was soft. "Where will you stay after today?"

"Would you mind? – "

"If you stayed here?"

"If you have no objection."

"Diane, I was hoping you would." She stared out of the window and the blush covered her face and spread to her neck. "But I would prefer it if you lived here with me." She hesitated. "If you wanted to."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"You are lovely."

Embarrassed, Leonie retreated to the bed. "It may sound stupid but I feel safe with you.

Secure. I don't have to pretend anymore. I can be myself."

"I know what you mean," she said softly. She liked being near Leonie and experienced a pleasure when she looked at Leonie's body. "Of course I want to live with you silly!"

The bare-chested runner had returned from his peregrinations and Diane watched him jump the style before she joined Leonie in bed.

"I have a spare room," Leonie said. She blushed, and then added, "what is mean is – your things."

"You don't have to explain," smiled Diane.

Into the room rushed Leonie's little boy. His hair was tossled and his pajamas askew. He stopped and stared at Diane.

"What are you doing in my mummy's bed?" he asked cheekily.

"I had a nightmare," Diane said immediately.

He pointed at himself. "Me too!" and he rushed into his mother's arms.

The little head disappeared for a while, but every few seconds would sneak a look at Diane and they bury himself again.

Diane laughed and began to tickle the boy who giggled and fell off the bed. The child, the morning and all its facets but particularly Leonie, reminded Diane of the happiness and ecstasy that were possible within human existence and she felt a sudden, overwhelming and unexpected desire to be alone.

"Do you mind if I go for a little walk?" she asked.

"Diane," replied Leonie obviously moved by the question, "you don't have to ask."

Hurriedly, though without shame, Diane dressed, careful not to let the revolver fall from her pocket. It's steel brought a reminder of the blood of the night and she quickly slipped through Leonie's rear garden, down the steep slope that separated the house fence from the pasture and scrub toward the river.

No one came to disturb her peace and she wandered along the well-worn path by the river in the burgeoning warmth of the early sun. Unaccountably, she found herself recalling almost note for note the beauty of Tammaso Vitali's Chaconne in G Minor and for an instant of infinite time she had to stop as she experienced in one incredible moment the ecstasy and the sacred beauty of life.

The mystic vision made everything around her seem holy and possessed of a stupendous beauty. But most of all everything – from the grass, the bushes, sky and trees – was as it should be, a part of a whole. There existed in the surroundings – in the soil she trod as much as in the sun which had cracked it dry – something of the numinosity that she had felt in the convent years of youth when in church, the choir singing Allegri, she had smelled the vague incense that seemed to suffuse the stone and nun's stalls; had seen the beauty of the sun as if shafted the gloom of the church and felt the centuries heavy in reverence and adoration.

Now, as it almost had then, the moment overwhelmed so that she was forced to steady herself by a fence and cry. Cry from an ecstasy that was almost incomprehensible and which no words could explain.

She saw and felt as if it was her own pain, all the bitter sadness and waste just as she realized and felt the beauty inherent in the world. She understood the possibility of what she – of what everyone – could be. She had been blind, but could finally see. Before she had heard noises, but did not listen and she finally understood the passion and demonic obsession that drove composers like Beethoven. Music was a commitment, a means to discover and express life. It could be holy, and might express the divine. She saw as if for the first time the rich blue of the sky, the sumptuous green and browns of the trees, the miracle of life that was the mallard and the indescribable beauty of people gifted with the wonder of thought and which yet might make them divine.

The moment overwhelmed, then passed, etched upon her mind and she sat in the cow-torn, broken and dewy grass. Nothing, she felt, surpassed this insight and she wanted desperately as she had never wanted before, to find a means to preserve the moment, to capture it for herself and others. The thought stirred her and she realized in her joy and vitality the essence of her freedom: she was free and had only to grasp a possibility to make that possibility real.

The spiritual poverty and impoverishment of her own life became clear. She taught, a little, but so many contradictions had pulled her she was largely ineffective. There was conflict because others sought to keep their own image and desires alive. Lies, deceit, blackmail, the bitterness and the hate, all destroyed vitality and vision. Only in and because of Leonie had she experienced hitherto a glimpse of what lay beyond – but it had been a vague longing partially fulfilled. Yet it was all so simple she now understood. So absolutely simple that there was no problem which a time under sun could not solve.

Carefully, she resumed her walk trying through the slowness of her motion to retain the precious moment and its mystic glow. As she walked, music grew in her and she began to feel the need to compose, to capture through such a form part of the essence she had touched. The thought brought renewed joy and a sharp intimation of destiny so that she ran along the path laughing playfully at herself. Tonight, when her thoughts and feelings had settled, she would share with Leonie this moment of hers.

Like an inspired composer composing, no cares assailed her. Each tree was a deity she blessed and over the slow water under a mottled sun, Diane the composer heard new music playing in her head.

IX.

It was a different Diane who strode before the fateful hour of nine into a staff room quieted by news of Apthone. The failed rapist lay in a coma, balanced between life and death, and Diane smiled when the worried Fisher with the balding head and nervous jerks of a coot, told her.

"It's awful, really, isn't it?" the sociology master said, before scratching his overgrown ear.

Watts and Morgan entered together and Diane smiled oddly at them.

"Can I speak with you Morgan?" she asked. Watts touched her shoulder, lightly, and sauntered off.

"Diane," began Morgan, "before you say anything – I am sorry."

"Why? You're only doing what comes naturally. How long has it been going on?"

Morgan looked pained. "Diane – "

"As far as I am concerned you can have him. And good luck. I hope you like bicycles."

Despite her affected anger, Diane could not help noticing how beautiful Morgan looked. Her dress, gathered by a belt at the waist, was the perfect compliment to her figure, the halter neck showing sun-browned shoulders that seemed to highlight the green eyes and red hair, and for a few seconds Diane envied her husband. Fortunately perhaps, she disliked Morgan's personality.

"Diane, it is all over believe me."

"Only because I found out." She smiled warmly, disconcerting Morgan who did not know how to react. "Really, I don't care. You're both consenting adults. I just hope he makes you happy."

She kissed Morgan lightly on the cheek and Morgan could only stare in amazement.

The gesture was only half kindly meant, for although the remembrance of her morning ecstasy was vivid with its visions, sufficient of Diane's anger remain to confuse her motives and she was about to explain her behavior to Leonie who was sitting morosely and alone by the sun-filled window, when Thomas the headmaster accosted her.

"Diane!" he said, placing his hand on her arm, a habit, which had hitherto irritated her. "Bad news about Richard, isn't it?"

"Yes." She lied. Apthone was one person she never intended to forgive.

Mr Thomas, the Headmaster, aproached her. "Can I see you in my office for a few minutes before the bell?"'

"Now?"

"If you have no objections, that is."

Lost Leonie was watching so she said, "Yes, of course, Mr. Thomas, I won't be a moment."

"No rush," he muttered in his abstract way.

Leonie appeared close to tears. "Are you alright, darling?" Diane whispered, holding Leonie's hand between the two chairs so that others would not see.

"Richard – he ….Last night when – "

"I know."

"And to think this morning I had been so happy."

It was true, Diane knew, for at breakfast a youthful Leonie had laughed, played with her children and afterwards allowed Diane the pleasure of helping her dress.

"It must have been him – his accident – that we heard," Leonie said morosely.

"Seems so."

"So close and we did not know. We could have helped. I feel so responsible."

"He was drunk."

"Really?"

"So the Police said. Stupid of him to drive when you're like that."

"But still – "

"It was his own fault, apparently."

"I suppose so. But if only I'd been there. I feel dreadful."

"The boss wants to see me."

"I heard." Suddenly Leonie's face glowed. "Hey – it might be your promotion!"

Diane laughed and stood up. "I doubt it." No one was near so she said, "I'll bring a few things around this evening if you don't mind."

"That would be nice."

Leonie's face with its gentleness appeared to Diane to express an ineffable need for affection, and she had to turn hurriedly away because she wanted to hold Leonie in her arms, stroke her hair and tell her of her love. Each step she took toward the door seemed a physical effort, separating her from the one person whom she loved with a deep and passionate intensity. The aura which they had formed and shared during and since the late hours of night when in the warmth and dark they made love and talked of their hopes and desires and needs, was stretching, dividing, and only a conscious effort of will walked her body along the noisy, child-littered corridors to the office of the Headmaster.

The large room was uncluttered and too tidy. Books sat undusted and unused behind the cabinet glass and the large desk contained only a few writing materials and a telephone. On the wall, two well-made notice boards hung, neatly filled, and the steel gray of the filing cabinet complimented the bureaucratic gray of the chairs.

"Ah! Diane. Nice of you to come. I shan't keep you long, believe me. Sit down! Sit down! Sit down!"

He rose in a gentlemanly way before settling his half-rimmed spectacles upon his nose.

"I have had a rather strange letter." He held the write envelope for her to see.

"Delivered by hand last night it was."

"And it's about me?"

"Yes. Not only that. Oh no – but enclosed was a photocopy of a private letter." He handed her the copy. "You recognize it may I ask?"

It was a copy of her letter to Leonie, and its existence and possession by Thomas shocked her.

"Yes," she said in a whisper.

Thomas peered over his spectacles like a judge. "What you do is no concern of mine, you know. Nor, ideally of course, should it be of this establishment. As long as it does not interfere with or affect your teaching – as I am sure it never will." He removed his spectacles, slowly and laid them on the desk. "I have a notion who sent this, and as far as I am concerned that is the end of the matter."

Diane was astounded. Her understanding of Thomas had been totally and utterly incorrect. The man of staff room jokes and unkind remarks was a lie, a figment of the imagination. There he sat, in his worn tweed jacket whose buttons were loose, his graying hair catching a little of the little sun that edged to his window, his lean and wrinkled hands fumbling with his spectacles, there he sat – smiling slightly, exuding a kindness that Diane could feel and understood. For a brief moment, Emlyn Thomas worn by the battles of his school and nearing retirement, seemed to Diana to be only very weakly attached to life, to the world of school, village and earth. If she blew, he might drift away to another world.

"Mr. Thomas – I don't know what to say."

He gave her a clean and starched handkerchief to wipe her eyes.

"I thought a lot, last night," he said stuffing the now damp white cloth into his trouser pocket, "about not telling you. But decided it was for the best. So you knew where I stood, so to speak."

Neatly, he folded the anonymous letter, photocopy and envelope together. "I'll burn this and we will say no more about it. Now – "

Diane was standing, as if on cue.

" – Before you go I would just like to say this." He smiled at her. "If you have problems, anytime, I am always here. You are too good a teacher to lose."

Diane's feeling of relief was strong and she had begun to walk toward him before stopping herself. She wanted to say he was a kind man, but she lacked the simple courage to directly express her feelings, and she was at the door before another intimation of his frailty assailed her.

She kissed his cheek. The gesture delighted him and he chuckled, "Perhaps I should get more such letters!" before she rushed from his room.

The knowledge that one more person knew her secret soon dismayed Diane, and as she walked along the corridors of the school to the room of her first lesson of the day, she felt oppressed.

The room was on the ground floor, shadowed by the angled assembly hall from the morning sun. The blackboard still held her mathematical equations, her desk a few tatty books. Soon the desks would be occupied. The trauma of Apthone's attack had been destroyed by her mystic ecstasy of the early morning, but the memory of the letter was fading in its reality and Diane sat at her desk, watching starlings pick worms from the playing field grass. No supra-personal love overwhelmed and she began to feel as if her vocation was drifting away – there would be suspicion and doubt, the keen sidelong look, the unspoken thought. Of course, she could deny it all – "I ought to say, Mr. Thomas, that I am not a lesbian….' But even the possibility of denial was repulsive to her. She was who she was, too self-willed to deny the accusations.

It was true, and she thought, briefly, of announcing to the world (well, at least the school staff) the truth of her nature. There were organizations, somewhere, she had heard, who would defend her rights. Yet her feelings and desires were deeply personal and she could not think of being labelled thus; somehow, it might debase her relationship with Leonie. No longer would she be Diane Dietz, the mathematics teacher – she would be Diane the lesbian, marked by the label which would colour what people said to her or thought of her. She knew it should not matter to others – but it would. The thought of Morgan – pretty red-haired Morgan – saying "and her a lesbian! Well, really, I always thought she was, well, a little odd!" was not a prospect at all pleasing and she would be forced to play a role. Worse, she was bound to lose her job. "I'm very sorry," they would say, "but you must understand we have a duty to the children. Imagine what the parents of little girls would think – a lesbian teaching their child."

"Miss," a young voice beside her said.

"What?" she smiled at Rachael. "I'm sorry, I was day-dreaming."

"Are you alright?" asked Rachael nervously.

"Fine. Just thinking."

"Terrible about Mr. Apthone, isn't it Miss?"

"I suppose so." She tried to disguise her feelings.

"Miss?" Rachael shuffled her feet while smoothing her thin cotton dress. "Can I ask you something?"

"Yes, of course, Rachael."

"My parents are giving a small party on Saturday and I was wondering, well, if you'd like to come. You could stay the night if you didn't want to travel back late to Stretton."

"Rachael – I …"

Bryan chose the right moment to open the door, stare around like a lunatic and tumble twice across the room with the control and agility of a gymnast. As he took his bow, Diane said,

"Your wealth of talent continues to surprise me, Bryan."

The calculated stupidity and innocent vitality of her pupil preserved Diane's objectivity as well as reinforced her dwindling

love of teaching. Rachael was sulking because of the interruption and aware of the delicate situation, Diane smiled at her.

"Yes, I love to come, Rachael."

"Oh," said Rachael a little dismissively, "if you like."

Dianne was not offended, for the classroom soon contained all of her sixth form set and, amid the dry heat of the cloudless summer's day in the restful Shropshire town, she soon forgot the pressures of her past.

In a hospital, fifteen miles to the northwest, Apthone opened his eyes while monitors pulsed with life. Briefly, Diane shivered, but Bryan was pulling his funny faces, Rachael was smiling at her and a slight breeze caught her face.

"Miss?" asked Bryan seriously.

"Yes?"

"Why do cowboys ride their horses into town?"

Diane frowned.

"Because," smirked Bryan, "they're too heavy to carry!"

Diane's laugh erased Apthone from her thoughts.

X.

A cooling breeze flowed through Leonie's sitting room while her children played in the garden. It was nearly six o'clock and Leonie was becoming increasingly morose.

"Diane," she said as she blew smoke from her cigarette away, "I feel I ought to go and see him."

Diane placed her pile of mathematics exercise books aside. "You don't owe him anything."

"But I am going to have his baby."

"You don't love him, do you?"

"No. But I feel responsible for him in a way."

"You ought to forget him."

"I can't. He needs someone, now more than ever."

"Are you surprised that he hasn't got any friends? Look at the way he treated you."

"He's going to be paralyzed for life, the doctors said."

"it was his own fault."

"You can be heartless at times."

"Leonie please don't go."

"Why are you so insistent? You're not jealous are you?"

"No, of course not! It's just that –"

"What?"

"Nothing."

"I think I'll go."

"Don't please."

"I have to see him."

"He's not worth it." Diane felt that Apthone was taunting her – exercising control over Leonie even from his hospital bed. Suddenly, she wished she had killed him.

"Will you come?" Leonie asked.

The thought horrified Diane. "Never!"

"Why do you dislike him so much?"

"It doesn't matter." She watched Leonie – soft, gentle Leonie – for some time before saying, "I wish you could just trust me. Accept I have a good reason why I don't want you to see him."

She sat down beside Leonie and held her hand. "Please, Leonie, don't let him come between us. You are all that I have left."

"I do care for you Diane." She stroked her stomach. "But for my own peace of mind, I really must go."

Tenderly, Diane said, "If you must, you must; I'll stay here with the children."

"Would you? Really? That would be kind."

Leonie was happy and ran from the room to tell her children. She returned hastily, to shout, "Won't be lone. Promise!" before the front door slammed and Diane was alone with her thoughts.

Leonie was shaking a little as the nurse led her to Apthone's room. It was brighter and much cleaner than she had expected, a corridor away from the main ward in the new glass and concrete Shrewsbury hospital. A monitor blipped in rhythm with Apthone's heart while a drip-fed some form of life into his arm. Near the solitary bed, a mechanical respirator stood ready.

Apthone lay on his back, unable to move, staring at the ceiling, his face puffy and bruised. A naso-gastric tube taped to his nose did little to offset the clinical nature of the room.

"How are you?" she asked.

Apthone gurgled. His voice was a thin reedy whine. "Tired."

"You'll be alright." His physical helplessness appalled Leonie and she held his lifeless hand.

"Leonie," he breathed with effort, "I love you." He closed his eyes.

"He's heavily sedated," said the nurse in explanation.

"Richard –"

"It's too late now," he said.

"Richard," Leonie whispered in his ear, "remember our child."

His eyes opened and he tried to smile. "Yes."

The nurse was gesturing at Leonie who said. "I've got to go now, but I'll be back later."

But Apthone was asleep and Leonie was crying as the nurse guided her to the corridor.

"Would you like some tea?" the kindly nurse asked.

An ambulance drove slowly away from the entrance while Leonie walked to her car trying to untangle the emotions which knotted her stomach and made her feel sick. People came, cars passed; a single-decker bus, bright red and flashing sun as its air-brakes panted in the heat, disgorged a few passengers under the cirrus flecked blue of the sky.

Leonie dreaded seeing Diane. Yet she wanted to rest her head on Diane's shoulder, stroke her beautiful flaxen hair and talk quietly of her feelings and pain. The conflict made her dizzy, and she had to steady herself by the car.

Ignoring the stuffy heat, she sat still in the car for nearly half an hour, disgusted with herself.

The years of conditioning were telling her, insistently, that she was a pervert. All the expectations of her parents, all the pressure of her role as a respected teacher, made her think her desire for Diane's love was unhealthy. She began to worry about her children and to feel it would be wrong for them if she stayed with Diane. They would need a father, a stable and proper family – all the things her upbringing had conditioned her to believe were right and necessary. Shame touched her, and she wondered if her feelings for Diane were simply an excuse, nothing special and their affair a trivial episode that signified nothing except a very temporary need.

These thoughts relieved her, and she forced herself to think about Apthone, vaguely aware that she might not, after all, be different from other women, some sort of freak. Apthone would need help, and the more she thought about his helplessness the more she began to feel that she might atone for her own weakness, inferiority and perversion by helping him. It was a noble sentiment, if wrongly conceived, for it did not occur to Leonie as it might have occurred to a woman who had not her confidence undermined for years by a neurotic and scheming husband and whose strict religious upbringing precluded self-expression, that she was neither inferior nor perverted. But her parents, her husband and the pressure of her role as wife and mother had done their work well, insidiously well, until she had almost become in herself what others expected her to be,

a reflection of their image of her. There seemed to Leonie to nothing inside herself, nothing of her own, nothing lovable – her husband had often said as much – nothing that mattered in any way special. Even as a teacher, the one area she felt gifted, she had soon her prospects of promotion fade with the advancing years, confirming her self-loathing and doubt. Unbidden, a remembered phrase broke the passage of her thought: '*Look up now, thou weak wretch, and see what thou art. Be loathe to think of aught but Himself...*'

The phrase brought recollection and a remembrance of the childhood dread of sin, the smell of churches and an image of Apthone, crippled. Leonie tried very had, while the hot sun beat down dryly upon her car, to pretend her feelings for Diane were not real. Diane did not love her – she was just being kind. Diane could not love her because there was nothing to love and she had just fooled herself again, as she had done about her husband's love. Morbidly, she believed she was in some sinister, occult way, responsible for Apthone's plight – she had wanted to abort their child, and she was culpable, before God, she was culpable.

No cloud came to ease the burden of heat, and she sat, quite still, while around her cars passed and were parked, people talked or laughed. A memory of happier days at university, free from self-torment and expectation and love, was soon gone, and she began to cry, very quietly, needing Diane yet terrified that such need was shameful and perverse. Desperate, she pushed all her thoughts, longings and desires aside, determined to shut out the world completely, to lock herself away, to be safe inside again.

She drove away from the hospital slowly and stopped only when she reached the driveway of her house. Shrewsbury town had seemed cheerful, if sultry, caught in the burden of summer's heat, and she wished it would rain, as if the rain would wash away her feelings of traumatic guilt. Instead of driving to her house, she stopped alongside the main road outside. No sign of Apthone's accident was evident, but she wandered beside the pavement imagining the terror.

She had been inside while a crippled Apthone shed his blood on the road – inside, enjoying the pleasures of her senses.

The contrast appalled her, bringing remorse for her own sensual desires and the desire to somehow protect the child growing in her womb – to give it life, or at least a chance of life.

Two young girls in flowery dresses came skipping along the pavement, oblivious to the tragedy, and Leonie smiled at them but they did not notice and continued on their way, small bundles of vitality whose innocence made Leonie want to cry.

Diane, her small suitcase beside her was in the garden when Leonie entered the house. Her children were watching the one-eyed god, unaware of her return and she sneaked like a broken thief into the garden. Below and beyond the boundary of fench, several young boys walked shirtless along the river path, strangely silent under the downing sun as insects swirled in profusion and a Redstart called.

Diane did not look up as Leonie approached. "Did you see him?" she asked.

"Yes." Leonie sat on the springy grass, restraining her desire to stroke Diane's smooth, tanned and beautifully lithe legs. If Diane touched her, she would be certain of her love.

The touch, and affirmation, she yearned for did not come and she clung in desperation to her guilt. "He said he loved me," she sighed, softly, like snow sighs softly against glass. For an instant she felt cold, as cold as a winter blizzard wind.

When Diane did not speak, she said. "I really ought to go back and stay with him."

"If that is what you want to do."

"It's what I feel I should do."

"Why?"

"Diane, please. We've been through all this before."

For an instant Diane regretted her insistence – but Apthone was so detestable and the thought of him using his self-induced helplessness to ensnare Leonie angered her as she had been angered by Leonie's desire to see him. She felt it was a betrayal, and she was jealous. She thought of her revolver, but the idea of murder displeased her because she understood, through her love of Leonie, that Leonie was free to make her own choices. She could not force Leonie's love. She wanted, with an almost demonic desire, to protect Leonie and the love they had shared; wanted, jealously, to share her with no one and she waited for some word or gesture from Leonie that would confirm their love. None came, and her desire nurtured the wish to tell Leonie about Apthone – but the assault was still too humiliating and degrading for her and its terrible memory broke the wish the way lightning breaks the air with sound.

"You must," she said clearly, "do what you think is best."

"What do you think I should do?" Leonie asked unexpectedly.

"Do you love him?" She watched the inner struggle evident on Leonie's face and was relieved when Leonie spoke.

"I don't know. Sometimes, yes. Other times – I don't know."

"But you want to look after him?"

"Yes. But I want us – you and I to still be friends. "To… But I bear his child. I can't escape that. He will live again in his child."

Leonie's faith, trust and innocence brought tears to Diane's eyes, but she hid them and when she spoke she was smiling. "I thought I'd spend the weekend at home. Get a few things sorted out."

Leonie's voice was a whisper. "If you want to."

"Well, if you are going to spend time visiting him, it would be best."

"I suppose so."

"Alex has offered to help me wind up a few things. Dispose of furniture: that sort of thing."

"Oh."

"I promised I'd see him tonight. He offered to move my husband's belongings," she said jovially, trying to make the lie convincing.

"Will you be alright by yourself tonight, Leonie?"

"Yes, Diane, of course."

"I could stay – if you wished."

"No, honestly. I'll be fine. The children are more than enough!" she said mournfully at the bedroom window where, in the early morning, she and Diane had stood. "Will you come and see me tomorrow, in the morning?"

"I would like to, yes." She held Leonie's hand. Leonie's grip was tight as if she did not want to let go but Diane stood up and the brief contact that brought a score of memories to Leonie was broken.

In the sky, a single cloud spread the sun in haze.

XI.

The Long Mynd, the growing bracken bright green against the drought worn heather, was cool as it stood in the Welsh breeze. A few cars lined the narrow pot-holed road that rose steeply up Burway Hill, meandered along the flattened top and then dropped precipitously beyond the Gliding Station to the scattered hamlets in the Onny valley. Shropshire west of the Long Mynd lived in a different time, for no main roads addled the small, steep hills; there was nothing special about it and after four thousand years of habitation the land wore its human mantle discreetly. Generations of families grew together and died, in small cottages, farms and even shacks. Few outlanders settled; fewer still bought holiday cottages and after two hundred years of industrialization and four decades of agri-business that had reduced Shropshire to just another English county, its settlements were mostly unchanged. Few small farms had been mangled to form the huge concerns often run from a city or a town; fewer hedges had been despoiled, and the native oak still grew wide and tall in the small fields, beside the twisty lanes or in scattered clumps that overflowed the Welsh border. It was as if a little piece of old Shropshire had been saved by its poorness and lack of tourist charm. True, Land Rovers and cars passed along the lanes, but even these seemed unwilling concessions and the only speeding vehicles belong to tourist outlanders. They seldom stayed long.

To these rushing denizens from the many conurbations and towns to the east and south for whom change and speed were more often than not solutions to the problem of boredom, the whole area seemed desolate and unkempt: farm fences would be patched with old bedsteads, old barns with odd pieces of sack or fence, and rusty, antiquated farm machinery would lay beside or on rutted lanes. But the land had its pride, a very local and individual pride which few outlanders could understand since the area was suited only to rough grazing or patchy spreads of arable crops. Yet, along many a lane among the mamelons, hedges were laid with a care born of generations of skill.

The whole area abounded in dark legends and strange names. Squilver, Grigg, Crudhall, Sorrowful, Murmurers. To the north lay the boundary crags of the Stiperstones where comely witches, raven and red-haired, were wont to meet in more enlightened times to practice fertility rites and the pagan ecstasies of the Old Religion which many a local myth said still survived, darkly and sometimes in the young. On the Stiperstones – Hell Gutter and Devil's Chair where Wild Edric lost his way and beneath which he lies imprisoned with his beautiful wife to haunt the mists of night.

Diane parked her car on the road by the square of trees that marked the boundary of Pole Cottage. No cottage remained, and it might never have been. Only the trees and a few ruts remained in the soil to mark its glory around the turn of the century when trains of pack horses and droving sheep wore steadily and slowly at the Portway track, marked across the Mynd by Neolithic man. Even the trees, spindly and twisted by wind and which solely relieved the heathered, mossy plateau, were dying, their seedlings destroyed every year by the roaming sheep.

Diane followed a downward westerly path among the heather, passed several tumps, to stand and gaze at the land below. Around, Meadow pipits flitted while the wind moved her hair and still warm sun cast her broken shadow. Nearby, a curlew called.

The sound of the curlew saddened her, but it did not take long for the Long Mynd to work its magic. The land below, stretching to the Welsh border, intrigued her with its hill-valleys and sun-shrouded calm. She felt a desire to live here with such a view, among the moors where she could sense, and feel in a way that calmed, the fructifying goodness of Earth, the sometimes dangerous and illusive serenity and the companionship of wind. She would never be lonely, and it was as if, in that moment and the others like it, all that she most needed or wanted from life existed on the Mynd. Often, as she walked, following in preference sheep tracks which few, if any, human feet had ever trod, in winter, autumn, spring or summer dawn, she had talked like a child to the land, naming every nuance of a valley or spirit of a stream. It was difficult, sometimes, for her to leave and when she did, after a long walk of many hours, she resented the scurrying world below. But, always, the numinosity vanished slowly and she had come to realize over many years that she needed people, and her life below, as much as she needed the long walks alone. But always, always, the lure of the Mynd drew her back.

She had thought many times of a cottage on the Mynd. But most of the land she loved could not be bought and the prospect of tourists trooping summerly displeased her, a little, with the passing of each year. At time, there existed within her no distinction between her as a person and the Mynd. She knew this must be an illusion, but the thought did not trouble her, as she did not care if others thought she was mad. It was a very private sharing which she doubted she could even share with a living soul as part of her wanted to share it – not because she cared what others thought, but because to talk about it to someone who could not or would not understand and who lacked the empathy she felt she herself possessed, would she knew destroy some of the sacred quality. Her feeling would be cheapened.

Yet there were cottages, scattered along the edge of the Mynd as it dropped steeply to the valleys and plains below. She might buy one, someday. She understood it was paradoxical that teaching inspired her like the Mynd. Her teaching was bright, an innocent joy that brought a remembrance of childhood dreams, while her Mynd was earth-bound and dark, a woman, a sorceress, perhaps, she had seen in her dreams.

She removed her shoes and stockings and, as she had done many times, walked barefoot on the moor. She loved the feel of the earth, stone and turf warmed by sun – even the brittle scratchy heather. A young man with a bright orange rucksack bore heavily alone the road, but he did not see her and she was left to complete her widdershin circumambulation in defiance of all cars.

Hunger and the dying sun drew her to her car, and she sat in the twilight trying to think of Leonie. The earth, wind and sky, her Mynd, had given her a calm, receptive power that enhanced in a indefinable way her sexuality and she experienced a desire for Leonie. Here among the heather, under the darkening sky they might together find peace. It was an impossible fantasy – because of Apthone the deranged. But the sad reality made Diane aware that, for the first time in her adult life, she possessed no desire, however small, for men. They were a world away and would not be touched.

The air, her thoughts and walk in bare feet, but most powerfully her empathy with the Mynd, all combined to alter her and although she did not know it, she radiated a beautiful and bewitching aura that would have captivated any man and made her mistress over them all.

Her house felt empty even before she opened the door to its darkness. The stain of Apthone's blood had faded and on the pine kitchen table she found her husband's note.

"I'm sorry," it read, "but we both knew our marriage never worked. Have gone to stay with Morgan. You see, we're in love."

He had not signed it and she took it to her bedroom. "It was kind of you to write," she wrote sincerely, "I wish you happiness and hope you achieve all you are meant to. Thank you for giving me some of the best times of my life. I will never forget how happy I have been and hope we can still be friends. Diane."

Her kindness came easily, since she had ceased to struggle, possessed no desire for men, and still felt the power of the Mynd and the memory of her morning ecstasy. She felt sad at losing part of her life, but it was deeper inner sadness that, in a strange way, calmed her – like a slow movement from the Vivaldi concerto. Somehow, the demise of her marriage seemed to compliment her new feelings and she felt free from the often-insidious pressures that a relationship with a man – any man – involved. However kindly they talked, however interested they seemed in her as a person, there existed the tension of their sexual desire and, often, a wish to dominate. She had scorned this at University and school not only because she instinctively distrusted men. The shallow personalities of her men friends had not attracted her, and she buried herself in her work. She had been courted, often, for her sylph-like beauty and intellectual mind seemed to attract, but she disliked the male façade of pretence, their insensitivity, and it was only a year before her marriage that she set out with a single-minded determination to seduce a man.

It had not been as exciting as she had anticipated and it, and her one brief subsequent encounter, did little to assuage her intimate feeling toward women. But, insidiously, there seemed to grow within her a desire for children. Little that she did or thought seemed to lessen it and the guilt she felt about herself, and when on one winter's morning with a sprinkling of snow

she had passed in her car an athletic young man clad in short sleeve jumper and shorts, a hitherto unknown desire possessed her. He was changing his punctured tubular tire and smiled as she passed, warm within her car, his well-muscled legs almost obscene, and his face and whole body suffused with health. For several days afterwards she thought of his eyes, and passed the same spot at the same time. He was always around, pedalling easily and fast along the snowy road joining her lodging and school. A week later she passed him, fully in thinly dressed, on a street in Stretton, and their friendship had been born.

But it was all over and in the sad serenity of her loneliness she prepared herself a meal.

Leonie, she felt, would be thinking about Apthone the half-dead, and tomorrow at Rachael's party, she, as befitted a natural Mistress of Earth, would were black. Her sympathetic witchcraft might even work.

XII.

Rachael stood in the bright light by her parents piano, laughing at Bryan's joke while , around her, her parent's guests gabbled or drank or smoked to mute a mostly-unintelligible background of Mozart. Rachael's use of cosmetics had been light, the result perfectly suited to her gentle features, but it was the manner of her dress that attracted Diane as a scruffy Fisher tried to engage her, on her arrival, in conversation and she tried to forget Leonie's telephone call. "He has asked me to marry him," the distant Leonie had said.

"Really, Diane," Fisher was saying, "even your subject can be taught in a more, shall we say, relevant way." He moved his mouth like a fish and his few strands of spiky hair swayed.

"What?" said Diane. Rachael had clothed herself in a black dress that exposed an ample amount of her large breasts and she wore a necklace of real amber. Her shoes and stockings were black to match her hair.

"Mathematics," droned Fisher, "can be taught – "

"Excuse me!" she said, pushing him aside.

"Hello Miss."

"I see we chose the same colour."

"Yes."

"It might suggest something. Your necklace is beautiful."

"It was my Grandmother's. An hereditary gift."

"It suits your green eyes."

Rachael smiled, and Bryan the astute, left them.

Diane touched the piano, gently. "Will you play?"

"I couldn't."

"For me?"

"I – "

"I will turn the pages of your music."

Rachael smiled and from the pile in the piano-seat selected a large bound book. She smiled, nervously, but Diane lightly touched her shoulder and she began to play the Arietta for Beethoven's Opus 111. Across the room, scattered with the guests, Bryan turned the Mozart off.

Soon, only the Beethoven could be heard, and had Diane been alone she would have cried. The music, the beautiful Rachael, her concentration, even the movement of her fingers, enthralled, bringing both memory and desire and purging her of the past. Apthone, the blood, Leonie, her walk by the river. But, beyond all, it was Rachael who captivated her. Rachael's perfume and music had bewitched.

Then, too soon, the perfect music was over. For ten seconds, silence.

"I did not know you could play like that!" said Rachael's astonished mother.

Rachael smiled at Diane before saying, "neither did I!"

It was Bryan who began the applause, and Rachael's mother who ended it by saying, "Really, it seems we have had a musical genius in our midst all this time!"

"Yes, Rosalind," grinned Fisher as he leered at her, "it certainly does."

Rosalind smiled endearingly at him, pleased with his attention, before ushering her guests into dinner. The dining room was about half the size of Diane's bungalow, the large oak table was formally spread and Diane began to regret her acceptance. She would have to make polite, boring and feminine conversation. Only Rachael's presence would redeem the ordeal. Bryan, the only other pupil, had been seated next to Rachael and was about to offer Diane his seat when Rachael's mother intervened.

"There Bryan," she said, patting his arm, a gesture he clearly disliked, "you sit next to our talented Rachael. I am sure you will have a lot to talk about, won't you?"

Bryan shrugged and sat down. Diane was seated between a benign old gentleman with white hair and a nervous man in an ill-fitting suit with a face of a starveling owl.

"Mr. Karlowicz," said Rosalind helpfully as she patted him on the arm, "is a painter."

"You the teacher?" asked the old man beside Diane.

"Yes."

"Oh," he replied puzzled. "I thought you were the teacher."

"What do you paint?" she asked Karlowicz.

"Canvas!" he chuckled, the resumed his nervous frown.

"Do start!" chided Rosalind.

Rachael was leaning forward over her melon and Karlowicz stared at her. But Rachael's smile was for Diane, and she ate her melon slowly while Karlowicz sweated in the heat.

"If you are not the teacher," the old man asked Diane, "are you the painter chap?"

"No, I'm the lesbian," she almost said, but manfully resisted. Instead, she said, "actually, I am the teacher."

"Funny, you don't look like the painter."

The agony was relieved only by Rachael, and she smiled at her across the table before immersing herself in the delicate task of social eating. The thought of Leonie, sitting beside the cripple Apthone's bed angered, momentarily, and she remembered Leonie's nervous voice over the telephone. "Diane – he, that is Richard, asked me to marry him." A silence while circuits crackled. "And will you?" she had asked. "I really don't know… but I have to consider the baby." And the guilt, Diane knew, always the guilt and insecurity oppressing. Apthone was poisoning Leonie: but there was not even a momentary desire in Diane, as there had been yesterday, to kill him and free Leonie. Her lover had chosen and in the sadness Diane remembered some lines of Sappho:

> Because you love me
> Stand with me face to face
> And unveil the softness in your eyes...

Diane sat in silence for the rest of the meal while Fisher monopolized the conversation with a lecture on the relevance and significance of sociology. She smiled kindly at him, once, but he was too engrossed in the torrent of his own words to notice while everyone except Rachael, Bryan and herself (and the old man, who had fallen asleep) nodded sagely their assent. Toward the end of the interminable meal she could see Bryan fighting a desperate battle with himself and was a little disappointed when he did not leap up and cartwheel over the table as part of him so obviously wanted.

"You see!" said Fisher, his eyes glazed while Rachael's mother served coffee, "the community of similar interests which underlies this restricted code obviates the requirement for subjective intent to be verbally elaborated and made fundamentally explicit."

Fisher smiled. "It's quite simple, Bryan. The codes determine the area of discretion – "

Diane could restrain herself no more. She stood up. "If you'll excuse Rachael and me. She has promised to play a little more music."

"Yes," agreed Rosalind, "that would be very nice. We could listen in here."

Rachael did not disappoint and followed Diane out.

"You don't have to play," Diane said as Rachael sat at the piano. "It was just an excuse."

"I know. But I'd like to play, Diane." She breathed the name softly and Diane was aware of the intimacy.

Scorning the Beethoven, Rachael played from memory part of Scriabin's Ninth Sonata. Half of her youthful face was shadowed, and as she bent of the piano, her eyes closed, her fingers seemingly possessed of a life all their own, she seemed to Diane to embodiment of enchantment and it occurred to her, very slowly, that she was seducing Rachael. As the last notes faded, undampened by the pedal, Rachael's mother shouted from the dining room.

"That is awful! Play something better."

Angry, Rachael played a few bars of a nursery rhyme before slamming the lid in disgust. The tempestuousness, the vitality and Rachael's youthful health, vibrated a memory in Diane and she was torn between a desire to become close with Rachael and her faithfulness toward the insecure Leonie. For an instant, an incredible instant, it seemed to her as if Rachael was the wildness of the Mynd come alive.

"Is Mr. Apthone any better?" Rachael asked, intruding upon her thought.

"Not really."

"I never liked him," Rachael said directly. "He gave me the creeps."

The juxtaposition of Rachael's mature sensibilities with the speaking of uncritical youthful thought confused Diane momentarily because she had forgotten Rachael was her pupil.

Rachael herself was embarrassed by the change and bit her lip.

"Shall I play some more for you?"

They were clearly forgotten, for laughter drifted from the dining room, following the cigar smoke and the aroma of ground coffee.

"Yes, Rachael, I would love you to. You never said you were so talented."

"I only play when I am inspired." She laid the book out at the beginning of Opus 111. "You inspire me," she said and immediately began to play.

Her playing and Rachael herself were sensuous. She was possessed, hardly seemed human and Diane found it difficult to believe her age because her playing was so full of mature emotion.

Rachael did not need the music and Diane stood beside her, fearing to breath, and when it was over she was crying, softly. Never before in her life had she been so moved by a piece of music: she had attended better performances, perhaps, listened to greater music, but never had it been so personal. Never had she been involved as she was when Rachael played. It was not Beethoven – it was Rachael and she, a joining of mutual souls. The music joined them together in an indefinable numinous way.

"Why," Diane said, trying to hold the moment through silence as she touched Rachael's shoulder, "are you studying maths?"

"I'm not that good," replied Rachael softly.

"Oh but Rachael, you are!"

Rachael shrugged. "I don't know. I feel different tonight. It was like I didn't have to try. I can't explain really. Once I'd begun, everything happened naturally. I've never felt like that before." She stared at the floor. "I've never been able to play the whole Sonata before – but I wanted to play well – for you."

"You could become a professional pianist."

"Would you be proud of me if I was?"

The question hit Diane like a slap in the face. Carefully, she said, "you are lovely as you are!"

Rachael's reply was never uttered as the guests, led by Rachael's mother entered the room.

"Mr. Karlowicz," announced Rosalind, gripping Karlowicz's arm, has agree to paint Rachael's portrait, haven't you?

The painter smiled awkwardly and nodded while Fisher grinned and said, "In the nude, eh?"

"I do not know," replied Karlowicz. "I cannot say."

"Until you have seen the goods, eh?" laughed Fisher while Rachael's mother smiled.

"Have you ever thought," Diane asked Rachael's mother in a loud voice, "that Rachael might be a pianist?"

"Heavens no!" She wants to be a mathematician, like my father. He was a Professor, you know."

"No, I didn't." Bryan had rescued Rachael from the clutches of Karlowicz and Fisher, and in a gentle voice Diane added, "she has a talent for the piano. A great gift. She could obtain a scholarship easily. It would be a pity to waste such talent."

"Nonsense! She is more gifted at mathematics. Like my father was."

Diane remained silent while Rachael's mother smiled gracefully and left to attend to her guests. Fisher was moving toward Diane, but she brushed past him. After the shared passion of Beethoven everything and everyone except Rachael seemed bland.

"Rachael," she said while Bryan winked at her and left to talk with Fisher. "I'm afraid I'd like to go."

Rachael's face crumpled and she looked as if she might cry, but Diane said "it's all right. Your piano playing has made everything – "

Rachael smiled. "Nowhere, Geliebte, can world exist but within. Life passes in transformation." Unnecessarily, she added, "I do understand, Diane."

"We must meet for a talk sometime."

"I would like that very much. Can it be soon?"

"I hope so." She moved to hold Rachael's hand but stopped herself. She felt responsible – for Rachael was barely seventeen and her pupil. She could pretend she did not care and become formal, delineating through her authority as Rachael's teacher, their respective roles and had she not stood and listened and shared with Rachael the Beethoven and had she not felt instinctively that her own feelings were reciprocated, she might have done so. She had no experience to guide her and felt confused.

"Can you convey my apologies to your parents?" was all she said.

"Yes – they won't mind. Probably won't even notice you're gone."

"I'll telephone you tomorrow," Diane said without thinking.

Rachael blushed. "I'll look forward to that."

They stared at each other, both unsure what to do. It was Diane who said, "Well, goodbye."

Without looking back she walked out into the hazy sunlight of middle evening.

The drive along the deserted Greenock to Stretton road brought some calm to Diane and she was able to forget, for a while, Rachael and her music. It was a beautiful evening, humid with a slight breeze and it did not seem to matter that the haze was caused by industrial pollution in Europe being carried in the lofty winds of the high-pressure area. Twice a day, five times a week during term, for nearly six years, she had been along the road and knew every grassy bank, the shape of every hedge through every season, even the position of each pothole. The road wound its undulating way, straddling the coppiced, oak-filled ridge that rose above the cultivated plain to the north-east of the Stretton fault, before dropping into the scattered farmsteads and villages of Ape Dale, and turning west over the Stretton hills and down into the valley, a funnel for trunk road traffic.

Everything here changed slowly. No new houses had been built during her time of tenure and over the years the villages through which she passed remained the same: the squat cottages with their small gardens of rose and bright flowers; the farms, often with the pungent smell of manure. She felt part of the land, secure because of her familiarity. Two-thirds of the distance out from Greenock lay a garage, skirting the few houses and bungalows of the village of Wall through which the road turned sharply west. The garage, well-worn and fraying brick, had been closed twice, re-sold often and now its small grimy windows showed the familiar sign: 'Under New Management.'

Diane slowed, but a large 'Closed' sign was battened to the patched door and she drove on while Beethoven played in her head. Stretton was quiet. Only a few cars were parked beside the Limes of the main wide street of Victorian shop facades. The cinema has long ago been replaced by a red-brick supermarket and the cottages which had once graced the top corner of the street down which the water flooded after storm, had been removed, replaced by Banks as the railway brought prosperity and popularity to the town.

The High Street, leading south past the mock columned Banks, was a jumble of periods from half-timbered Georgian through mock wattle and daub to a handful of Victorian facades, and the breeze stirred the pavement litter. It had been a good day, for tourists.

The narrow road widened past new housing estates clawed out from farming land, past the disused and quaintly small gas-works to the beginning of World's End and the foot of Ashlet Hill where Diane's bungalow lay, shaded from all evening

sun. She sat in her car in the driveway for several minutes, thinking about Rachael and Leonie until someone rapped on the roof.

It was Watts. "I've been waiting for you."

"Lucky for you I was early then. I suppose you'd better come in."

The sitting room smelled, vaguely, and she opened all the windows wide.

"Well?" she asked while Watts leaned against the frame of the door.

"Have you seen Leonie?"

"No."

"They are getting married."

She betrayed to surprise. "I thought they might."

"You know why?"

"I've got a good idea."

"She feels guilty as well, I presume."

"It's typical of Apthone."

"You don't mind?"

"She had her own life to lead."

"And Apthone?"

"I try not to think about him." She shivered involuntarily. "Would you like some coffee?"

"Yes." He did not stand aside and she had to brush past him on her way to the kitchen.

"Please don't." She moved away.

"But Diane – "

"I'm sorry. I've gone off men since – "

"What?"

"Nothing. It doesn't matter."

Watts held her by the shoulder, but she did not look at his face. "Diane, I love you."

"Don't say that!" She wriggled free.

"Why not? It's true!" She stood with her back to him and he said, "What's wrong? What has Apthone done now?"

"What make you think it has anything to do with him?"

"Instinct," said Watts sharply.

She turned around suddenly. "Look Alex, I'm very fond of you but at the moment I don't want any sort of relationship. With anyone."

He smiled, lopsidedly. "We'd all be better off with Apthone dead."

"He's crucified himself."

"And now he's crucifying Leonie. And you." He watched her very carefully. "You've gone off Leonie, haven't you?" When she did not answer he said, "Because she is still bound to Apthone, isn't it? She prefers Apthone to you."

"You don't know what you are talking about!"

He smiled. "I think I do."

"I'm very tired," she said coldly. "I'm sorry but would you mind if we forgot about the coffee?"

"You want me to go?"

"Yes."

"I guess I can wait a little longer," he shrugged then squinted at her. "Did Apthone come here the other night after I left?"

"What makes you say that?"

"Nothing. Just a guess. Well, I suppose I'd better be going then."

"If you wouldn't mind."

She walked with him to the door. "All problems can be solved," he said mordantly. He moved to kiss her but she stepped back and shut the door before he could speak.

She was tired and sat in her sitting room while a refreshing breeze caught her face and ruffled, slightly, her hair. Among her records she found a performance of Beethoven's Opus 111 but it was Rachael's music and she could not listen to someone else playing it.

Instead, she contented herself with watching a television program. The play seemed realistic with the characters screaming at each other in broad Glaswegian and she watched it to its conclusion before switching the set off. The real world was in her head, full of conflicting dreams and desires, and after she had carefully closed all windows and locked and bolted the doors, she undressed for bed.

Sleep did not come easily and in the humid darkness she was restless for many hours before the pleasant relief of sleeping dreams overcame her troubled mind and allowed her naked, sweaty body to relax. The dreamed she was by the sea under a beautiful blue sky but the sea was full of rubbish and untreated sewage. Rachael was walking nearby, laughing and smiling while she talked to several young men. She walked toward her and, as a stranger invited the beautiful girl for a drink. Access to the bar of the hotel was through a small door through which they had to crawl and she had ordered drinks for them both while Watts the bartender sneered. She felt guilty and tried to escape through the door, but the opening was now only a small hole and she could not squeeze through. Instead, she returned to Rachael secretly pleased that she could not escape.

She was awoken in the early morning hours of darkness by the ringing of the doorbell. A brief terror suffused her, but she calmly dressed, gathered her revolver from the drawer and walked purposefully into the stinging brightness of the hall.

It was Rachael, leaning on her cycle and Diane hid the revolver behind her back.

"I had an argument with my mother," she said.

"And you've cycled all the way here?"

"Yes."

"You'd better come in."

Rachael wheeled her bicycle into the hall while Diane hid the gun in a pocket of a coat by the door. In the sitting room, they sat together on the sofa.

"What was the argument about?"

"Nothing."

"It was about me wasn't it?"

"Yes." She stared glumly at the carpet. "She said I was too old to have crushes on women teachers."

"I see."

"She doesn't understand." Nervously, she bit a nail. "I'm not wrong, am I?"

Looking at Rachael's face, Diane could not lie. "No, Rachael, you are not wrong."

"What shall we do?"

"I don't know. I am in a very difficult position."

"Because you are my teacher?"

"I'm afraid so."

"I wouldn't want to do anything to harm you."

"I know. Are you sure – "

"That it is not just a crush? Oh yes, I'm sure."

"Do your parents know you are here?"

"No."

"Hadn't we better tell them? They will be worried."

"I'm over sixteen. Anyway, they don't care about me – only about themselves."

"Shall we telephone them?'

"I'd rather you didn't. I left a note. They'll find it in the morning. It was really awful after you left." She looked around.

"Is your husband here?"

"No."

"Oh. I presumed – "

"Actually, we're getting divorced."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Can I stay with you – for a while?"

"It might not be wise."

"But no one will know – about us, I mean."

"There is nothing for anyone to know."

"But the could be, couldn't there, Diane?"

"You might be mistaken about yourself."

Rachael smiled. "I don't think so. Not after tonight. When I played the Beethoven for you, I knew. I have felt like this for you for a long time, but never dared say anything."

"If the weather is fine tomorrow, shall we have a picnic on the Long Mynd?"

"That would be marvellous!"

"Now you must get some sleep. I'll show you to the spare room." She smiled. "I don't suppose you brought any clothes?"

"No."

"Don't worry. You can borrow one of my nightdresses. It might just fit!"

"It doesn't matter really. It's too hot anyway."

Diane showed her to the small room, somewhat cluttered with space bicycle wheels and punctured tubular tires.

"Diane, it's very kind of you."

Embarrassed, she said, "Sleep well."

"And you."

Her own bed felt damp with the sweat that the sultry night had drawn and she lay naked on the sheet in the airless room. She heard the church clock strike the half-hour and she counted the three tolls. The bedroom door opened, showing a chink or light from the hall and she lay motionless while Rachael sneaked into her bed.

"I couldn't sleep," the girl said as she lay beside Diane covering herself with part of the duvet.

For several minutes they both lay still, without speaking, until almost at the same time they moved toward each other. They embraced, strongly, naked body to naked body, before relaxing in each other's arms, and it was like that that they fell asleep to dream in the humid heat of the night.

XIII.

Diane's awakening was gentle and she opened her eyes in response to Rachael's hand to find Rachael dressed and holding a tray.

"I thought you'd like some breakfast."

"What time is it?" she asked, grogged.

"Half past ten."

"Really? I have overslept!"

Holding the duvet to cover her breasts, she sat up and took the tray. "What's the weather like?"

"Beautiful!" Rachael opened the curtains and window. "I didn't know how you liked your eggs, so I guessed. Hope they are all right. There's more coffee if you want it."

"Do you know, this is the first time that I have ever had breakfast in bed?"

"You deserve it! I'll finish cleaning the sitting room."

Before Diane could respond, Rachael left. Soon, she heard a vacuum cleaner being used and she had finished her breakfast and set the tray aside before Rachael had returned.

"Shall we take sandwiches?" an exuberant Rachael asked.

"Sorry?"

"For the Long Mynd. You know, the picnic."

"I hadn't really thought about it. Did you sleep well?"

"Yes. But I always get up around six."

"Good heavens! Why?"

"I run." Shyly, she added, "not far, only a couple of miles."

"Rather you than me."

"Your ought to try it."

"No thanks, I'm happy being as I am – fat and flabby."

Rachael laughed, gathered the tray and said, "I'll see to this while you get dressed."

Rachael was not an intrusion into her privacy, and Diane found it natural that she should be around. A little diffidence remained, but it was if they had been friends for years. She emerged dressed to find the whole house, with the exception of her bedroom, tidied and cleaned.

"Well," explained Rachael a little embarrassed, "I woke up at six out of habit and had to do something."

"Do you want to telephone your parents?"

"Not really."

"It would be best."

"Well, if you think so."

"You could say you were staying here for a few days – that is, if you want to."

Rachael was ecstatic. "Can I telephone them now, then?"

"Yes, of course"

She returned dejected. "My mother wasn't too happy. She wants me to go home."

"And do you want to?"

"Not any more."

"Shall we go for a walk?"

"I suppose so."

"Rachael," Diane said softly. "I don't mean to interfere. You are an adult – you can make you own decisions. You are free to do what you want. Nobody owns you – not any more anyway. If you wanted to leave school for that matter, no one could prevent you. But if you want to stay, do so for the right reasons, not because you are being emotionally blackmailed."

"By my mother you mean?"

"Maybe. I don't know, and it's not really for me to say. You must make your own decisions."

"I don't want to go back home. There's nothing for me there."

"Except a grand piano!"

Rachael laughed, "except the piano!"

Together they walked from the bungalow in the warm air of mid-Sunday morning along the road to Little Stretton and the wooded track to Ashes Hollow: a stream filled batch between the steeply rising hills of Grindle Hills and Yearlet. The summer's morning was alive with promise and the early mist had been dispersed by the sun, leaving dewy grass. The water in the stream was low, and Rachael removed her shoes to walk barefoot. No one came along the isolated valley to disturb them.

"Cor!" Rachael shouted, "this water's cold!"

Under the blue sky, with a wind to cool the rising heat of the sun, surrounded by the nature-filled peace of the valley, it was not long before Diane had removed her own shoes and began walking tentatively among the stones and boulders of the stream.

It was the splash of water that Rachael threw over her that freed her and, like two friends of the same age, they played in and with the water, chasing each other in turn, until they were both exhausted and soaked. On the grassy bank they stretched themselves to dry.

"Do you want to do mathematics at University?" Diane asked.

There was a long pause, while Rachael ran her hand through the short, sheep-cropped grass and a Dipper bobbed around the stream. "Not particularly. I don't know what I want to do."

"You could make a career as a pianist."

Rachael laughed, but it was not a dismissive laugh. "I don't know as if I want to, though."

"You have ample time to decide."

"Probably. Now I'm leaving home."

"What would you like to do this afternoon?"

"I could stay here all day."

"If I stay here much longer I will fall asleep."

Rachael sat up. "I suppose we'd better go and change."

"Hmmm." Diane closed her eyes and Rachael crept to the stream to fill her shoe with water.

Slowly, she poured it over Diane's head. Diane shrieked, and chased Rachael along the path. A middle-aged man with a wizened face stood by the footbridge at the end of the path where it grew rocks, staring with a puzzled look at the two women. They saw him and stopped their chasing and playful yells.

"Good morning!" said Rachael loudly as they passed him.

He looked at them both quizzically, snorted and strode purposefully down the path while Rachael and Diane laughed.

"Race you home." Rachael said.

"It wouldn't be a race! Perhaps if you gave me fifteen minutes start!"

"You'd be home by then."

"Exactly!"

Barefooted they followed the track to the road and the warm pavement to Diane's home. In front of the driveway stood a car.

"Oh dear," said Rachael, nodding her head toward it, "trouble!"

"Your parents?"

"My mother."

"Rachael!" shouted her mother as they drew near, "what have you been doing?"

"Just a walk mother."

Her mother was speedily out of the car. "Just look at you! And Miss Dietz, I'm surprised at you!"

"Would you like to come in for some coffee?" Diane asked with a smile.

"No thank you. I came to fetch Rachael. And by the looks of things I arrived just in time."

"Oh mother, don't fuss!"

"Are you sure you won't come in?" Diane asked.

"Rachael," shouted her mother, "put your shoes on and come with me!"

Rachael held her head to one side. "No."

Her mother looked startled for a moment. "What did you say?"

"I said no. I'm staying here with Diane."

"I see! So it's Diane now, is it? Just wait until your father hears of this!"

"I'm staying with Diane. I'm leaving home."

"That is impossible!"

"No, it is not. I'm over sixteen."

"You are just a child!"

Rachael turned away but her mother held her arm. "Rachael, you are coming home with me this instant!"

"No I'm not."

"How dare you speak to me like that! Do you forget who I am, who you are?"

But Rachael shook herself free from her mother and turned toward Diane. "I can see you have had a hand in all this Miss Dietz."

"Its Mrs. Dietz, actually," corrected Rachael.

"I see!" shouted her mother, embarrassed and angry. "Well, Mrs. Dietz, I am holding you responsible for all this. Dividing our family. Rachael are you coming?"

"No! I'm not!"

"Well Miss Dietz, just wait until Mr. Thomas hears of your interference. A fine teacher you are telling a young girl to disobey her parents!"

"Mother, that's not fair! It was my own decision."

"I would not at all be surprised, Miss Dietz, if you weren't forced to resign over this. Encouraging young girls in their lewd and sordid fantasies indeed! You should be ashamed of yourself, corrupting a young innocent girl. You are not fit to be a teacher!"

Diane's smile only served to make her more angry. She got into her car a slammed the door.

"Rachael! For the last time are you coming home?"

"No."

"Just wait, Miss Dietz! I am not without influence with the School Governors, you know!"

Then: "You .....!" She was too angry to speak, and drove away.

"I'm very sorry," Rachael said when she and Diane were safely in the house.

"Don't worry," smiled Diane. "It will be all right, I'm sure. Come on, we'll get changed."

"But she said you'd get the sack."

"I'd resign first."

"But you can't. You haven't done anything!"

"That's not what other people will think."

"I don't really care what they think. You can't resign. I won't let you. I'd go back home first."

"It probably won't come to anything. Just a little storm in a big teacup."

"You don't know my mother! She won't give up. It's not fair!"

"Would you like a shower or a bath?"

"If I wasn't your pupil there is nothing anyone could do, is there?"

"But you are and there is."

"But if I left school…"

"But you can't."

"Why not? You yourself said I could. Anyway, I can and I'm going to!"

"But Rachael – "

"I'll get a scholarship to the Royal College of Music!"

"I couldn't let you do that."

"Unless I wanted to."

"Rachael – "

Very quietly, Rachael said, "I don't want to leave you. You must realize I love you."

The Beethoven, the playfulness by the stream, Rachael's mother, Rachael's offer and her pleasing words, were too much for Diane and she turned away.

"I – " began Rachael. "I'm sorry if I've – if I have offended you. I thought – "

Diane did not look at her. "You haven't."

Rachael's voice was tearful. "I assumed we –" nervously she smiled. "Perhaps I ought to go home."

The battle was hopelessly lost, for Diane could not bear to inflict any more agony upon Rachael.

She turned to see Rachael's face contorted between anticipation and terror of rejection, and her embrace of Rachael relieved her of suppressed emotion as much as it made Rachael happy.

For several minutes they stood in each other's arms, swaying slightly while sun leaked to them from the window in the hall.

"I don't want you to go: I don't want you to go." Diane said. Then: "I really think we should get changed."

They parted, but held hands. "What shall I wear?" Rachael asked, looking at her sodden dress.

"I have a few clothes which might fit. You're a bit larger than me, though."

Rachael looked down at her breasts and giggled. "I meant what I said you know. About leaving school."

"It probably won't be necessary."

"But if it is – I will do it."

"You don't have to."

"Yes I do. I want to. Because I want to stay with you, Diane. Always."

Diane held Rachael's hand tighter. She felt a great love inside her and the sadness of losing Leonie had been immeasurable reduced. But she was afraid.

"You can stay here as long as you wish," she said, "whatever happens."

Several strands of Rachael's dark hair were stuck by sweat to her forehead and Diane brushed them tenderly aside before Rachael kissed her fingers.

"I shall buy you a piano!" she said, blushing and embarrassed.

"And I shall play for you in the evening when we are alone."

"When will you collect your belongings?"

Rachael shrugged. "Today, tomorrow, I don't care."

"Fine. Now will you change your clothes?" she said jovially.

"I'm just going, Miss" replied Rachael sarcastically. "Please don't beat me!" She laughed and ran into the bathroom.

She was sitting among the perfumed foam when Diane entered bearing clothes.

"Diane," she began with an enchanting smile that belied her age. "Will you bath me?"

Diane was trembling, but she laid the clothes aside long enough to kneel beside the bath and kiss Rachael lightly on the cheek. On the roof of the house, several jackdaws fought.

XIV.

The invitation, or rather command, had not been long in coming upon Diane's arrival at school, and she sat in Thomas's office while he studied some notes on his desk. Outside children played beneath a branding sun.

"Now, Diane," he smiled, neatly folding his spectacles before wiping his brow of sweat. "Mrs. Paulding, as you may know, has, er, been in contact with me regarding her daughter, Rachael."

"I thought she might."

"It seems, from what she had told me, that Rachael is staying with you against her parent's wishes. Is that so?"

"Yes."

"Diane – I will be honest with you. I am in a difficult, not to mention delicate situation, as I am sure you appreciate. On one side, there is Mrs. Paulding; on the other, you. Mrs. Paulding has, shall we say, made some serious allegations."

"About me and Rachael, I presume."

"I'm afraid so. And since Rachael is a pupil – "

"She isn't."

"Pardon?"

"She isn't a pupil anymore. She had decided to leave school."

"Do her parents know of this?"

"She telephoned them this morning."

"I see." He fumbled with some notes on his desk. "Is that Rachael's own decision?"

"Yes. Nothing I could do to dissuade her."

"But is she, er, staying with you?"

Without rancor, Diane said, "I know what you are implying. But it is not like that at all. She is simply staying with me because she has left home and has nowhere else to go – at the moment."

"I would like to believe – "

"But you know that I am a lesbian."

"No! No! Good heavens! I didn't mean to imply – "

"That I am corrupting Rachael?"

"Diane," he smiled kindly at her. "I know you well enough after – what is it? Six years? – to know that you are a very professional teacher."

"I'm prepared to resign," she said slowly and mutely.

"Come now! I won't hear of it!"

"But – "

"We can sort this out, between the two of us."

"But the Board of School Governors – "

Thomas smiled – a strange smile, mixing benevolence with occult knowledge. "I am sure I can come to some arrangement. With Mrs. Paulding. No need to involve anyone else. Would it be possible for me to speak with Rachael?"

"Of course. Do you want her to come here?"

Thomas pondered. "No. It would perhaps be best away from school."

"Mr. Thomas?" asked Diane shyly.

"Hmm?"

"Can I ask you a personal question?"

"You mean why am I, as Headmaster of a vast and sometimes incomprehensible Comprehensive school, going to such trouble for you?"

"Well, yes."

"It is simple really." He smiled his strange smile. "You are a good teacher. But perhaps most of all – the pupils like you. Strange that, are rare, believe me. But – "

"But?"

"I realize that you are undergoing a difficult period in your life – what with you marriage and everything – but you should perhaps be more, shall we say, discreet?"

"And not become involved with pupils?"

"Precisely."

"I never have before and never intend to again."

"Good. I can help this time. There will not be another, believe me. The last thing we as a school need is another scandal," he said abstractly. One was enough.

A year ago, one of the male teachers had had an affair with a female student. When it became known, he had left in haste, leaving the girl and her baby, to find employment in a large city in America, a suitable place many agreed.

"No," said Thomas, shaking his head, "Not another scandal." He thought for a moment. "It may be necessary for Rachael to leave. Would she have obtained her 'A' levels?"

"Definitely! Good grades, probably."

"I will talk with her tonight – " His telephone rang.

"Mr. Thomas speaking… Hello Rosalind! I've just heard." He covered the mouthpiece with his hand and said to Diane, "I'll call after school."

"Fine!" She smiled at him to find Watts lurking outside the door.

"I've heard," he said perfunctorily.

"How?" Diane was surprised.

Watts tapped his nose with his forefinger. "Shall I just say a middle aged witch told me."

Diane watched him suspiciously. "What have you been up to now?"

"Come to dinner tonight and I'll explain everything."

"I can't. Mr. Thomas is coming to see Rachael."

"Lunch then?"

Diane was intrigued and said, "Yes."

The morning passed painfully slow for Diane. She expected her classes to be interrupted by Mr. Thomas who would ask for an urgent meeting. Or Mrs. Paulding would rush in, pointing the accusing finger and shout, "you lesbian! Corrupting my daughter!"

Yet, because she was an accomplished teacher, and she actually cared for the children she taught more than she cared about the teaching staff or what they thought or said, she was able to teach as if nothing had happened, as if it was another Monday morning like any other – except the last week of term and exceptionally hot. Only one blemish marked her morning.

As she walked to meet Watts by the double glass doors that fronted the school and overlooked the car park and Windmill Hill and near where school buses thronged at the beginning and ending of the day, Bryan accosted her.

"Miss," he asked, "is it true that Rachael has left?"

She looked at him, amazed. "News travels fast, I see."

"Her parents told me."

"When?"

"I saw them at break."

"Here?"

"Sure! Going into the Crater – I mean Mr. Thomas' room."

"Oh, I see. She might be leaving. I really don't know yet."

"Probably the best thing that could happen."

"What?"

"Her leaving. I mean, like getting a scholarship in music."

"Bryan – "

"Sorry Miss," he smirked, "got to dash!" He ran to join the throng of children bound for the refectory.

Watts was waiting by his new car and she allowed him to close the door as he seated himself.

"And where," he asked, touching his forelock, "would Madam like to be driven today?"

She waved her hand imperiously, "That way, my man."

"Very good, Madam!" he saluted.

He took them through the town, along a few twisty lanes all neatly hedged, to an isolated country Inn. A few cars were beside the lofty Oak outside and in the cool if dim and modernized interior they sat with their drinks.

"Well?" she asked before drinking most of her cider.

"Eh?" groaned Watts obtusely.

"Any idea why Leonie did not come in this morning?"

"No." He drank his pint of ale in a few gulps, burped and said, "It's me charm which get 'em! You any idea?"

"About Leonie? No, she wasn't in when I telephoned this morning."

"With the bastard Apthone, no doubt."

"Probably." She finished her cider.

"Like another?"

"Not for me. I can't teach well if I have too much to drink."

"Huh! I can't teach without too much!" He loped to the bar taking almost half of its width, and returned with a mug of dark brew and plate of sandwiches.

Diane snatched most of the sandwiches from the plate. "You were going to tell me about Mr. Thomas."

"Was I now? Did you see Morgan this fine morning?"

"No. She kept out of my way."

"Not surprising really,"

"Mr. Thomas?"

"Nay, lass, me name be Watts. 'Thumper' for them as 'ave a care."

She clutched his mug. "Are you going to tell me or do I shampoo your hair?"

Watts chuckled, rather loudly. "Not the dreaded beer over the hair ploy! All right, I give in, I'll tell you." He squinted at her. "There was gossip a few years back about him and Rachael's mother."

Diane was astonished. "Really? I never heard about it."

"Yep. 'cause," he smiled, "it might not be true."

"And?"

"You know me! I went to him and said, nudge, nudge, wink, wink – "

"You're showing your age now."

He ignored the remark. "I said to him, straight like, 'Create quite a scandal, a story like that. And you a Headmaster.' And he said, "well I'll know whom to thank' and gave me a straight look." He waited for the accolade. There was no response, so he said, "I think he got the message."

He finished his beer. "You'll be all right."

Diane understood only too well. Outside, the sun shone bright and hot while a lark sang above a field. On the road a car passed while sunlight glinted upon glass.

Diane sighed. "You really shouldn't have."

Watts shrugged. "What the hell? I did it because you're a friend, not because of what you are thinking."

"Was there any truth in the rumour?"

"About the boss and Rosalind?"

"Yes."

He smirked again. "Who can say?"

"You can I am sure."

"Just between you and me and the rest of the staff, of course, there was a lot of truth in it."

"How do you know?"

"Shall we get back?"

"If you like."

"I've something to give you when we get back to school."

"What?"

"Wait and see."

They returned through the Shropshire landscape in silence. Watts occupied, as well he might be, with his maniacal driving, Diane with her sombre thoughts. Two children were fighting by the main door when they returned but when Diane instinctively went toward them Watts held her back. He handed her a small neatly wrapped package.

"Open it when I'm gone," he said and strode off to lift the two boys with bloody noses straight into the air and carry them bodily into the foyer.

Inside the package, wrapped in a small, embroidered silk purse, was a sapphire engagement ring.

XV.

Diane had spent the afternoon trying to avoid Watts, and she was glad when school finished. Unusually, she felt no desire to retire to the relative peace of the staff room, as was her habit, to drink coffee, talk a little or mark some of the children's exercise books from the inevitable pile that had collected during the day. Instead, she hurried in the tropical humidity toward her car while school buses siphoned the children away.

The sameness of her journey make it uneventful, but she stopped by the side of the road near the rocky outcrop of Hope Bowdler Hill before the Greenock road cut its way down to the Stretton valley. Clouds gathered to obscure a little of the Stretton valley and she could smell ozone among the wind-borne smells of summer.

Slowly, she began to realize that little that was real or natural bound her to the land on which she lived, still less to the surroundings of her school. She and her fellow teachers formed a cabal – a sort of sub-community within the boundaries of Greenock, Shrewsbury and Stretton.

Most of her own friends were teachers from the school, and almost all of her social life involved them, the parents or school events. She, and the others like her, had little contact with the community from which the children came. She did not live among her pupils, and indeed the school was too large for her to know all of them personally, as she wished. The school day ended, and she was gone, shut up in her house or with her friends while the children carried on their lives, in a little sub-society all their own. Children came to her eleven years old and she taught them, watched them, and worried about them for five, six, and soon seven years. And then they left. Sometimes a little card, or a meeting by chance. But they were gone; lost to her world of village, town and school. The thought made her sad, but she knew no solutions and, under the gathering gloom, drove slowly home.

Rachael was waiting, her hair plaited, her body clothed in a bright cotton dress, and as soon as Diane opened the door, Rachael embraced her.

"Mr. Thomas is coming," Diane said.

"I know. My mother telephoned." She took Diane's handbag. "Come and sit down. I've made some coffee."

"That's kind of you. Have you changed your mind?"

"About what?"

"School, of course."

"No." She brought coffee and demurely offered Diane a piece of cake. "Hope you like it."

Diane held the cake suspiciously, then thought better about making the joke. "Hmm," she said truthfully, "it is delicious! You are lovely!"

"I suppose," said Rachael sullenly, holding her head in her hands as she sat next to Diane on the sofa, "Mr. Thomas will try and persuade me."

"Probably."

"My mother wasn't angry, you know."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Quite calm about it all. Strange, really."

"I suppose she's realized that you are a young woman, not her little girl."

"Your husband called this afternoon. Seemed surprised to find me here."

Diane smiled. "Good!"

"He left his door keys."

"Did he say what he wanted?"

"Just some wheels – for his bicycle I think."

"That fits! Did he say anything else?""

"Don't think so. Oh yes, he left you a note."

With supine agility that Diane admired, Rachael leapt from the sofa and extracted the letter from the mantelpiece.

'Diane,' it read. 'I will call tomorrow to collect the rest of my belongings. Sorry things did not work out and thanks for your kind letter.'

Diane screwed the letter up and threw it toward the empty fireplace. She missed and Rachael had moved to retrieve it when the doorbell rang.

"I'll go!" said Rachael excitedly.

"Rachael!" Diane heard Thomas say, "how nice to see you!"

"It's Mr. Thomas," said Rachael unnecessarily, as she let him into the room.

"Well now, Rachael," he said as he sat down. "You know why I have come to see you?"

"Yes."

"And you are still of the opinion that you want to leave?"

"Yes."

Diane stood up. "Would you like some coffee?"

"I'll be in the kitchen," Diane said.

"Diane," said Thomas, "there is no need for you to leave, I assure you."

"Mr. Thomas," Rachael said.

"Yes Rachael?"

"I'm not going back."

"But why? You have your 'A' levels next year."

"I don't want to." She looked at Diane. "Besides, I can't live with Diane – Mrs. Dietz - if I'm at school, can I?"

"Well," muttered Thomas, "it would be highly unusual."

"I'm not ashamed to say that being here is more important to me than going to school or taking examinations."

"I see." He looked owlishly at Diane before smiling at Rachael. "And what will you do? For a career, I mean?"

"I haven't decided yet. I may not need one. But I could try for an RCM scholarship. In the meantime, I thought I would study privately, and still take my exams."

"I see." He smiled benevolently. "You seem to have thought everything out."

"Yes, I have."

"Well, you could not have a better tutor!"

"Has my mother spoken to you?"

"Naturally." He stared at the carpet and shuffled his feet. "She realizes that you are old enough to make your own decisions about your future. She would still like you to go home, of course."

"There's no chance of that."

"No, that's what I thought. Well, I'd best be on my way." He stood up and shook Rachael's hand. "I wish you well for the future. You are in good hands."

Rachael blushed. "Thanks."

"I'll show you out," said Diane.

At the door, Thomas said, "I'm well satisfied. I do not anticipate any problems – with the school, at least. Diane," he whispered, "it may not be any of my business, but she is very young."

"Does she look happy to you?"

"Well, yes. Very much so, in fact."

"You have answered your own unasked question then."

Thomas appeared a little embarrassed. "Well, goodbye then. See you tomorrow, as usual!" he said cheerfully.

"Yes." She watched him walk to his car before closing the door.

"I'm glad that's over!" said Rachael.

"So am I!"

"I was trembling all over."

"Honestly? I thought you were very self-possessed."

Rachael laughed. "I feel really free! And happy!" She danced around the room shouting "I'm happy! I'm free!"

"Fancy a walk?"

Rachael stopped, stared out of the window and scowled. "It's going to pour!"

"I'm game if you are. I am not afraid of the rain, even if you are," said Diane playfully.

"Where do you want to go then?"

"Top of the Mynd?"

"Suits me. It will be nice and windy up there!"

They decided against the car and walked into the town along the High Street to take the road to the Burway. By the cattle grid that stopped the spread of detached houses and signified the beginning of the moorland, they left along a track to follow the path by the stream in Townbrook valley. The hills rose steeply on either side, fledged in green and sheep while the sky above grew darker and distant thunder rolled.

The thunder alarmed Rachael a little, and she threaded her fingers into Diane's as they passed almost four hundred feet below Devil's Mouth, its scree and frost broken boulders scattering the hill. The upward path of cracked, bare and brown earth led them past the growing ferns toward the greenish-gray siltstones of the Long Synalds heights.

It was an isolated spot, well known to Diane, and overlooked the small, spreading valleys that fed the stream in Ashes Hollow. Behind them, the hill rose steadily until it became the levelled plateau of Mynd top.

Thunder violet threatened them above as lightning forked, striking higher ground. Almost instantaneously the clap of thundering air, which shook them as they huddled close to the ground. The Mynd seemed to vibrate in response as Rachael screamed amid the large drops of rain. Another flash, nearer, as rain and thunder battered them and ozone seared the sky. The darkness of rain and closing cloud was ominous.

But Diane was a dark goddess; imbued with the storm's power and she laughed and beat her fists into the soaking earth. The storm was her storm and would not – could not – harm them. Its power was hers, but she let it break itself over the town and hills beyond. Then, both she and Rachael were laughing – a strange laugh, redolent of Dionysus, perhaps, or an ancient witches' meet. Rain soaked them, but they did not care. They alone were alive in a world of the dead.

Slowly, their demonic life-enhancing ecstasy ebbed with the passing of the storm, and they were left to find their way down the hill while their bodies tingled and their sense of reality returned.

"You realize," Rachael said as they trod the street into the town, "we are bound together now. Beyond even our own death."

It was not a strange thing to say, and it did not sound strange to Diane. Somewhere, alone their walk into the storm they had crossed into another world.

"I know," she replied. The bonds that had bound her to Leonie were broken and her own fear of becoming deeply involved with Rachael had vanished, as the lightning had vanished, sending only a distant thunder while they walked.

They were both removing their sodden clothes when Diane's doorbell rang. It was Leonie, and Diane, in her dressing gown, stared at her with a mixture of welcome and annoyance.

"Leonie," she finally said, "come in."

Hurriedly, Rachael wrapped a towel around her body.

Leonie stared at Diane for a second, and then said, "I can't stay long. The children are in the car. Hello Rachael."

"Hello Miss," said Rachael shyly and locked herself in the bathroom.

"I just came to tell you," said Leonie sadly, "that Richard asked me to marry him – and I said I might. Only – "

"Only?"

"I thought we – " she hesitated, then added, "but I see I was wrong."

Diane held her arm. "Leonie. You know I didn't want you to become involved with Apthone again."

"He needs me," she said gently.

"For God's sake! No he doesn't! Not in the way you believe. He's just using you – again!"

"That's unkind of you." She shook Diane's hand off her arm.

"No it's not."

"You have never liked him, have you?"

"No!"

"I thought we understood one another."

"We can't – with Apthone in the way."

"I will probably marry him. He's very kind and gentle."

Suddenly Diane was angry. "Look!" she pointed to the wall of her hall. "See those stains? Do you know whose blood it is? Well, I'll tell you! It's your bloody, beloved Apthone! You know the night of his accident?" she was re-living the terror and the words would not be silenced. "He came here, your precious and gentle Richard, and tried to rape me!"

Leonie stepped backwards, holding her hands to her face. "It's not true!" she said weakly. "I don't believe you."

Diane shook her head. The anger and terror and repressed guilt had gone and softly she said, "I really don't care if you believe me or not."

"You only said it because you hate him," pleaded Leonie, half to herself.

"Leonie – I didn't ..."

Leonie was crying. "I don't want to talk to you," she said and ran out of the room.

Diane was about to follow when she heard Rachael behind her.

"Diane, I couldn't help overhearing."

Leonie had driven away and Diane closed the door.

"It was true, wasn't it?" asked Rachael, "what you said."

Diane nodded and began to cry. "I shouldn't have told her I know. But I was so angry."

Rachael came to her and held her hand. "I hope I didn't embarrass you."

Diane stopped crying. "Embarrass me?"

"By being here – with no clothes on."

Diane was moved by Rachael's gentle innocence and embraced her. "Rachael, my darling, nothing you could do, would embarrass me."

"I can think of something," she said with a modest smile before loosening Diane's dressing gown and bending down to kiss her breasts. Diane was trembling, and slowly Rachael let the gown fall to the floor before she led Diane toward the bed.

XVI.

Exceptionally, Diane did not wish to leave for school. For a long time she lay in bed, Rachael curled up asleep beside her. She wanted to stay with Rachael, spend the day with her, for school seemed charmless, a charade full of children in adult bodies playing indoor games.

Rachael seemed to make everything clear; there was no guile in her, only a trusting innocence that Diane loved and wanted to cherish and protect. Last night after Rachael had broken the barrier which Diane herself had feared to break, it had seemed, many times, that she and Rachael were not different people. There was no question of identity, no barriers of any kind at all

and they did not have to speak to understand each other's needs. A look, a vague smile…

And she found it difficult to believe, in the hazy light of morning, that Rachael was so young. An instinct seem to guide Rachael and her body so that she gave to Diane a divine and physical ecstasy such as she had never before experienced.

With Rachael, all her own insights and experiences – the path by the Severn, the Long Mynd, the storm, even her planned revenge on Apthone – seemed to possess her again with a force all their own, as if Rachael, just by loving so selflessly, transformed those insights into reality and suddenly it occurred to Diane that she had never been in love before. Always, with her husband, with Leonie, a part of her had been detached and critical just as a part had not surrendered for fear of being hurt. But with Rachael, everything was easy and natural and she wanted to find some form, some suitable expression, with which to represent her love. She wanted to hold Rachael in her arms, cry and laugh at the same time and tell her that she loved her as she had never loved anyone before.

Through and because of Rachael, she possessed everything she had even dreamt about, and beside this young and beautiful woman, men seemed a pale, distorted flicker. Rachael fulfilled the deepest longings Diane had ever nurtured.

She kissed her, softly, before stretching and leaving the room to dress. On the kitchen table, laid and make ready by Rachael the night before without Diane's knowledge, she found, propped up on a vase containing a single white rose, a note. 'Diane' it said simply in Rachael's italic hand, 'I love you.' Diane was overwhelmed, and crept back to the bedroom to steal a look at her sleeping lover.

It was nearing eight o'clock when she was prepared. Rachael, unusually, still slept, and, closing the kitchen door, she used the extension to make her telephone call. Calculated deceit was alien to her and she was shaking when she dialled Fisher's number.

"Hello? Diane here. Sorry to bother you, but just rang to say I won't be in until after ten this morning. Can you get someone to look in on my lower sixth group? Good…. Sorry about the short notice but – " she hurriedly thought of some excuse, " – I have a dental appointment. I'd forgotten about it!" she laughed to give credence to her lie.

Diane was still trembling when she closed the door and walked to her car. No mist blighted the sky as no regret blighted Diane.

Shrewsbury was busy with commuter traffic and she followed the road over English Bridge, round the Town Walls, and Quarry, along the river until she drove past the stone memorial to Hotsper to park on a side street. For over half an hour she sat on the grass where the tall spire of St. Margaret's church shadowed squat buildings while the road channelled traffic down toward Wyle Cop Hill. She enjoyed quietly watching the people rush along the pavements, buses stop to empty and fill, cars to pass, and was almost sad when the time came for her to leave.

She waited outside the shop on Dogpole, while heavy lorries beat upon the narrow road, until its myopic, stooped owner opened, reluctantly, it seemed, his door.

"Can I help you Madam?" he smiled.

"I hope so!" Diane said confidently. "I want to buy the best piano you have in stock."

The man's eyes brightened, and he wrung his hands. "Certainly Madam! But we do not carry a large stock." He sighed. "All we have at the moment is this Baby Grand." He patted it gently.

"Would you like to try it? It has lovely tone. Actually, I'm very fond of it myself, but get so little time to practice, these days."

"I'll take it."

The man raised his eyebrows. "I could play a little, if you wish."

"No, really, it looks perfect. When can you deliver?"

He scratched his nose. "Toward the end of the week?"

"How about today? I don't care what it costs."

"Of course, Madam. If you are sure."

Quickly, she wrote out the cheque and handed it to the man.

"But Madam – " he protested when he looked.

"I'll leave you to fill out the amount. You can send the bill. You'll want the address, of course."

"Yes, Madam."

She wrote it on the back of her cheque. The man stared at the check, then at her. "A present!" she said."

"Yes, of course, Madam. We do provide free tuning for a year. I myself – "

"Splendid! What time will you deliver?"

"What time would be most convenient?"

"Four this afternoon."

"I am sure that can be arranged."

"Splendid…and," she added, "I assure you the cheque will not bounce. You can telephone my bank, if you wish. Or I can go to the bank now and withdraw the amount in cash, if you prefer."

"There is no need for that Madam, I assure you." He scratched his nose. "If you could provide me with a telephone number where you can be reached during the day. Only if an unforeseen problem arises, I assure you."

"Yes, of course." She wrote the telephone number of the school on her cheque. "Well, goodbye."

"But Madam," he protested as she made for the door, "don't you want to know how much it will cost?"

"Not really," she smiled and left.

She was trembling as she walked toward the High Street. Soon, she had arranged the transfer of all her savings. Wistfully she knew it might not be enough, but did not care. It was irrelevant compared to Rachael's happiness and she smiled as she tramped along the streets to her car, singing softly to herself.

On her return to school she found Watts and Morgan in the staff room alone. But they could not spoil her bliss and she walked toward Morgan while Watts eyed her hopefully from his corner.

"Well," she said jovially to Morgan, "I hope you take care of him."

"I was a bit worried – "

"About me? Don't be! As long as you are both happy, what's the problem?"

"I thought – "

"Do you love him?"

Morgan gave a little smile. "I think so."

"Has he mentioned marriage?"

"Yes. But I'm not sure. It's too soon."

Diane touched her on the arm. "Take your time and learn to be happy. Are you interested in cycling?"

"Only a little."

"Well, there's hope then."

"Diane, why are you being so – so nice?"

Diane laughed. "Simple! Because it makes people happy. It is really easy to be happy."

Morgan shook her head. "I don't understand you."

"Nothing to understand, really," Diane quipped before turning towards Watts.

He grinned at her. "Did you like it?"

She sat down beside him. "Yes. But look, Alex, I don't want to hurt you – "

"But you are going to anyway."

She shrugged. Morgan was making some exercise books, but Diane still whispered. "You know what I am."

"Part of you perhaps."

"No, Alex. All of me. I care for you, very much, but I could never become involved as you wish."

"I've loved you for years. Since the first day I met you."

"Please," she sighed, "I'm living with Rachael."

"Temporarily, I assumed."

"No, permanently. You might not understand, but we love each other."

"What! You and Rachael? She is only a child!"

"I don't want to talk about it any more."

"I won't give up," he insisted.

She removed his ring from her handbag. When she held it out, he pushed her hand away.

"You keep it."

"I can't."

"Yes you can. Why do you think I have never married?"

"Please," she pleaded. Then: "But I thought you loved Leonie?"

He shrugged. "Maybe. But only because she reminded me of you."

"Why don't you fight for her?"

"Maybe." He stood up. "You keep the ring." Then without rancour, but with his lopsided smile, he said, "give it to Rachael."

Before she could reply he had walked away and out of the room. Morgan was smiling at her, but she could not have been more wrong.

XVII.

The bulbous red sun was still hidden behind the height of Caer Caradoc when Diane and Rachael began their journey. No traffic blighted the road and in the cool respite of an early dawn the world seemed quiet and quite dead.

Diane could not afford the holiday, but she did not care. The piano had been delivered, as promised, and Diane remembered how Rachael had laughed, then cried and enfolded her in kisses when she had returned, a little weary, from school. All evening she played, creating through her music a magic spell that bound Diane and made her a prisoner of love and desire.

Then, at last, an exhausted Rachael, her body and dress drenched in sweat, had held her hand and said, "Now I want to give you something special." Her body still ached, a little, from the passion of Rachael's love.

The hours brought the heat and the traffic and both were relieved to leave the car when they arrived at the Yorkshire hamlet of Gilling. To the north, less than a mile distant, were the North Yorkshire moors while to the south, the plain of York whose fertile land had been farmed for millennia. There was nothing unique or even interesting about the village – a few stone built houses gathered around a dip in the road from Helmsley to York – but for Diane it was special. Not simply because a mile away to the northwest lay the imposing while stone buildings of Ampleforth Abbey with its community of Benedictine monks, but also because of the surrounding lakes and forest, once part of the wealthy Fairfax estate and now managed by the monastery. For her, discovered by chance while at University, it was a place where she could relax, untroubled by crowds of people, and where, after a walk in the forest, she could sit in the monastic choir with its carved oak stalls, and listen to the beauty of Gregorian chant. But perhaps the most fitting of all, she could swim privately in the icy coldness of the lakes.

The cottage guesthouse was Spartan, but clean, and they unpacked hastily in their shared room before briskly walking along the narrow track to the lakes. On one side, the forest, on the other, grazing fields, the monastery and its enclosing large Public School.

"It seems very peaceful," Rachael said, stroking her amber necklace.

"Is it – even during term time when the boys are here."

"A shame about the trees."

"Sorry?"

"The trees." Behind the roadside deciduous fringe, a conifer plantation grew. "Shame it is so dead within."

"By the lake – "

"It is different!" said Rachael confidently.

"Yes."

"I bet it has a dark history."

"I wouldn't know."

"Up there, on the hill, where the broken tree grows."

They walked in silence to the lake. It was a small lake, girdled with trees and reed and a rotten jetty pointed like a broken finger toward its heart. But there was silence and a pale blue sky while water rippled, slowly.

They undressed and swam naked, racing each other to and from the jetty to where a small rusty buoy was anchored, until tired with the effort and by the cold of the water, their laughter and the long journey, they lay on the mossy bank to dry beneath the summer sun.

"If we hurry," Diane said as Rachael stretched herself like a cat, "we might be in time for Vespers."

Dressed, but not dry, they walked the mile or so to the monastery through the large expanse of rugby fields until, in the slanting shadows, they stood below the church while crows flocked noisily above the stone.

"Come on!" chided Diane as she climbed the steps to the church.

Rachael shook her head. "I'd rather not go in."

"Why ever not?"

"I'm afraid places like this give me the creeps – always have done." She shivered.

"You should have said! I'd never have dragged you all this way."

"I didn't want to disappoint you."

"Anyway," smiled Diane, "it doesn't matter and I'm hungry."

Arm-in-arm, they returned to their lodging.

The next day began the pattern which they were to follow for the remainder of their stay. They would rise late from their bed and after a large breakfast walk among the forest and hills, often silent, but sometimes sharing through their words their private thoughts and dreams, fascinated as new lovers often are by each other. They talked, played, walked or sat, touching, sharing every experience: the damp feel of rotting wood, the dew of the grass, the joy of watching a deer, the naming of wild flowers. Their afternoon was spent swimming and lying in the tessellated lakeside sun while the earth moved imperceptibly toward dark. It was sufficient for them to be together, close enough to touch, and it did not occur to either that such exclusive closeness might restrict. In the evening, they would lock their bedroom door and exhaust themselves with love. Not once did they visit the Abbey, and the days with their sameness soon passed, bringing to both security and great joy. Rachael, with her sometimes sombre thoughts, bound herself physically, emotionally and mentally to Diane. Diane was everything to her: lover, sister, husband and wife. The labels, and the roles of the world, which they hid, were meaningless for them, and it never occurred to either of them that there was anything unnatural about their relationship. No barriers reminded and no guilt bound them just as no thought restricted.

They would dress to please each other, perfume their bodies richly, and sometimes, soak into the pores of their body the heady scent of forest or lakeside earth. The earth, with its canopy of trees spread full for summer, the reedy depths of the lake, the sun and scarce breeze, even the moon of morning, served them, offering gifts, nurturing the divine. No music sufficed for their feelings, no words could represent their joy.

Once, when the sun made long shadows by the road and dust dried their mouths, they had left in their car for an Inn. It was an old Inn, gabled and small, and they sat in the corner, cleanly dressed but scented of earth, their faces blushed and burned by both sun and lake water, while tourist men fresh from tourist cars stared and local men surmised.

They had allowed themselves to be brought drinks, a meal they did not need, while the two vultures in perfumed shirts that had sought them out preened and fed their minds with glee at the promise of the night. Under the table, Diane caressed Rachael's leg with her foot.

"Well," she said finally, "we'd better go."

A vulture grinned. "Shall we drive you home? I have my Mercedes outside.."

Rachael, Diane knew, understood, and wickedly she said, "Well, we are staying at the Grange – The Abbey guest house." She told the lie well.

"Yes," a leering face said, its moustache twitching, "I know it."

"If," whispered Diane, "you want to see us, come after eleven tonight. We'll leave the doors open. I'm in number 17, second floor."

"And I," smiled Rachael, "am in 19."

Outside, in the privacy of their car, Rachael said, "That was very naughty of you!"

"Awful wasn't it?"

"But I enjoyed it."

"So did I!"

"Did you see their faces when you gave them your room number?

"Yes! I thought they were going to wet themselves."

They laughed, and waved at the two men dallying between the Inn and a Mercedes car before driving away, pleased and satisfied with their ploy.

It had been the happiest week of both their lives, and both were sombre when the morning of their departure arrived. "We must never part!" Rachael had said and clung to Diane before the long and tedious journey that returned them to their home. It was significant, both felt, that on their return cloud came bringing a steady drizzle of rain.

On the floor of their hall, scattered by the letterbox, three handwritten notes lay, but Diane had time only to retrieve one of them before the telephone rang.

"Hello," Rachael said. Then, sadly, "It's Leonie - for you."

"Hello, Leonie, Diane." She held Rachael's hand while she talked. "Yes, we're back. What? When? ... I see. Yes, of course, I'll come."

Rachael was looking at her expectantly. "It's Apthone," Diane said, "he's dead."

In the dim light of late evening, Diane was certain she saw Rachael smile.

XVIII.

"I would like you to come," said Diane. "Very much."

"I – I don't know," replied Rachael shyly. "I might be in the way."

"You," Diane said kissing her, "could never be in the way as far as I am concerned."

Rachael smiled. "I was a little jealous when she telephoned."

"No one is more important to me than you."

"I know really. I just like to hear you say it, that's all."

They departed immediately and it was dark and still raining when they arrived to find Leonie and her house in a state of confusion.

"Children are in bed," she said her face drawn. Nervously, she bit her nails, "Diane, I am so glad you came!"

Leonie moved forward, but Diane stepped back. "I brought Rachael with me – I hope you don't mind."

"No. I wondered if you would." Her voice trembled. "Come in, both of you."

Diane sat on the edge of the sofa while Rachael stood in a shadowed corner of the room fingering her amber necklace.

"When did he die?" Diane asked.

"The day before yesterday. It was awful!" She sobbed a little, then smiled.

"Has no one been to see you since?"

"Yes." She lit a cigarette and blew the smoke away. "Alex. He was with me just before Richard...."

"Has anyone seen to the funeral arrangements?"

"I don't know." Leonie tried to control her shaking hands, and partially succeeded. "Alex mentioned something."

"Is there anything I can do?"

Leonie smiles. "It is nice you just being here."

"Perhaps it was all for the best."

"Don't say that Diane!" Leonie started crying.

The memory of their love returned to Diane, but she ignored her feelings and, in atonement, handed Leonie her handkerchief.

"Thanks." Then, to Rachael, "You must think me silly."

Rachael came forward and to Diane's astonishment kissed Leonie on the cheek.

"No, I don't" she said. She astonished Diane even more when she said, "Do you want us to stay here – for the night, I mean?"

"No," smiled Leonie, holding Rachael's hand. "That's very kind, but I'll be all right. Alex – Mr. Watts – said he's calling round later to see how I am." She returned the handkerchief before saying, "Would you like something to drink?"

Rachael and Diane looked at each other. Diane said, "No, not for me."

"Rachael?"

"No, thanks. We had something on the way down."

"Of course," said Leonie, "You've just got back, haven't you?"

"Yes." It was Diane who answered but Rachael who yawned.

The ringing chimes of the doorbell startled Leonie. "I'll go!" offered Rachael.

Watts blocked the doorframe and smiled broadly. "Rachael!" he said loudly, "You look more beautiful every time I see you."

Rachael curled her lip, but he did not wait for her reply.

"Well!" he boomed, rubbing his hands together and shaking rain from his hair, "I see we're all gathered for the wake!"

Diane stood up and smiled politely at Watts. "We are just going."

"Had a good holiday, then?" he asked.

"Yes," said Diane, staring at him, "very good."

"Splendid!" He turned to Rachael who was standing by the door. "I see," Watts said to her, "you're not wearing the ring Diane bought for you."

Rachael looked at Diane quizzically. "It was a surprise!" she said quickly, "and now the oaf's spoiled it!"

"Sorry," he said without conviction.

"We'd best be going," Diane said.

"I hope both of you sleep well," Watts said sarcastically.

Diane ignored him. "I'll telephone," she said to Leonie. "In the morning to see how you are."

"That would be kind." Leonie smiled weakly and went with them to the door. "It was good of you to come. I only wish you'd been here before."

"Take care, won't you?" Diane said.

"I'll try."

They stared at each other for a moment until Diane turned and walked into the rain.

"I hope," she said to Rachael as they walked to the car, "he didn't offend you by his remarks."

"No," laughed Rachael as Leonie closed the door, "he didn't. I don't care what he or anyone else says. He can call me names as far as I care."

Diane held the car door for her. "We might get more of the same in the future."

"So what?" When Diane had started the engine, she added, "I love you. That's all that matters to me. If the whole world was against us, I wouldn't care."

"Rachael, you continue to amaze me!"

"Why, because I am so mature?"

"Well, yes."

"I had to grow up quickly when I was younger. My mother – " she began. "But it doesn't matter." Then she began to quote some verse:

> "We don't love like flowers, with only a single
> Season behind us; immemorial sap
> Mounts in our arms when we love."

She smiled innocently. "There's a lot more, but I won't bore you with it."

"It was beautiful," said Diane sincerely.

"It was Rilke."

"Really? I see I'll have to read him."

"He's one of my favourite poets.

"You must read me some."

"I'd love to."

"I suppose you can read it in the original German as well?"

"Of course!" smiled Rachael.

Blissful, they returned to their home. The rain ceased with their arrival and in the subdued light in the now cramped sitting room of their bungalow, Rachael sat at her piano to transform herself and the night. Diane listened and watched, entranced. Rachael's playing created a new world and a new woman, and Diane watched this strange woman of dark secrets create from the instrument of wood, steel and tone a universe of beauty, ecstasy and light. Bach, Beethoven – it made no difference what or for how long she played. But, as it always had since that night, Beethoven's Opus 111 fascinated her with feelings, visions, and stupendous, world- creating thought. It imbued her with insight, and a love that wanted to envelope Rachael and consume her. It was pleasure and pain to watch Rachael transform herself through the act of her playing into a goddess she would die for. No reason touched her while she listened. There was, she knew, no greater life than this, no greater feeling and she wanted to immolate herself with Rachael's ecstasy, immolate world upon world with this glory and passion which no male god described.

Then the silence, while clamoured notes faded and dimmed light framed. There were no more tears Diane could cry and she waited while Rachael slowly rose and offered her hand. She – the goddess within – was smiling and Diane allowed herself to be led.

The music in her head, the memories and secret dreams of youth: all were before her, embodied in flesh and she had only to kiss the slightly scented lips or see the secret wisdom hidden in the eyes to reach the summit of her life, slowly, in the dim corners of the bedroom's reflected dark.

IXX.

The journey was lonely and more terrifying that she had thought or imagined it would be, and for a moment the memory of her children's faces held her. But her ineffable sadness remained and Leonie Symonds in the burgeoning dawn drove the steep road to the Mynd.

Cloud fractured the sun, spreading luteous colours of stupendous beauty while light mist lingered in the Stretton valley below. Nothing in sound challenged the engine of her car and with shaking hands she attached her chosen instrument of death. Soon the fumes filled the chilling air as a memory of Diane filled her heart and creeping death her lungs.

Consciousness flickered, briefly, and was gone as her mind tried to tell the body of a new desire to live. Too late the desire and very slowly Leonie Symonds, not quite thirty-three, slipped toward death.

The dream startled Diane and she awoke sweating while Rachael turned in her sleep. But the light did little to ease the sense of foreboding and with trembling fingers she dialled Leonie's number. It was some time before the answer.

"Leonie?" her trembling voice asked.

"Eh?" said a gruff voice. A cough, then "Who is this?"

"Diane."

"Oh, Alex here."

"Where is Leonie?"

"She got up early. Said something about going for a walk. I just went back to sleep. Hang on."

It seemed minutes before he returned. "She gone! There's a note...My god! I'll ring you back."

No call came, and, dazed, she dressed to sit by the piano with a fresh mug of coffee. But she could not be still and woke Rachael.

"I'm just off for a walk," she said. "Won't be long."

"Shall I come?" Rachael asked, sleepy.

"No, you need your rest."

Rachael smiled and went back to sleep.

The dawn was chilly and she wandered sadly among the spreading light, cheered a little by the changing red around the sun. No one passed her, and she walked steadily through the town to briefly sit upon the Burway bench overlooking Cardingmill valley and its stream. The silent beauty of the morning calmed her, dispelling the fear and dread of her dream and she trod happily the steep of the hill while sheep wandered to find the warmth of the sun.

At first recognition escaped her, then the reality of the car held her immobile. She ran, shouting Leonie's name. But she was too late with her love. The door opened to the grip of her hand and she stood staring in shocked agony as the warm body tumbled out.

"No! No!" she screamed as, behind her, tyres slowed on gravel and scree.

Watts looked briefly at the body, turned off the engine of Leonie's car and gently led Diane away.

XX.

The light of dusk blurred the contours in Diane's room and Rachael watched through the window the hills and trees soften in outline and fade with the slow silent passing of time.

Diane did not move, content to stare at her hands as she sat hunched in a chair, weakened by guilt. She smiled, a little and briefly, when Rachael rose to gently stroke her hair, but this interlude of life was soon gone. Outside, a few birds sang to call the moon from sleep.

Rachael began, haltingly at first, to play upon her piano but it was not long before the music consumed her, obliterating the external world. Beethoven's Opus 111 became again for her the embodiment of her feelings and she played faultlessly, draining away the morose days since Leonie's death, forgetting Diane's withdrawn self-absorption and her own tiredness.

She did not notice Diane standing beside her as she did not hear her lover crying in the burgeoning dark of the room. The music was transforming Diane, each note breaking slowly the barriers she had created within her as if the music explained all the grief and elevated her inner suffering to a supra-personal joy. Before the music ended, the catharsis was complete, but she waited, silently crying and when it was over she knelt down to place her head in Rachael's lap.

"I'm sorry," Diane said as Rachael gently brushed the tears away, "I must have hurt you a lot in the past few days."

Rachael smiled. "I'm glad we are together again."

"I will never be apart from you again."

Tomorrow, Diane felt, she would sit at the piano and try through the medium of music to express in composition all she had experienced: Leonie's tragic death, her own ecstasy and visions, the moments of dark magick when she felt herself attuned to the powers of the Earth, the innocent joy she found in teaching. But most of all, she wanted to try and capture in some lasting form her love for Rachael, and began to feel as Rachael began to play music by Bach, that her life possessed meaning. She might, through her music, and way of living help in some way others to achieve the insight that she knew Rachael had made possible for her. Even now, she did not understand how this had happened. Was it simply because of love?

Outside her house darkness was stirring, but inside she felt herself renewed through the brightness of personal experience and she began to feel a presentiment of meaning of individual existence that she knew only music, for her, might explain. She rose slowly – while Rachael seemed to measure with music the cadence of those feelings – to watch the stars shimmer in the

dark sky above.

But clouds, rushed by wind, soon came to cover the sky while, less than fifteen miles away, Watts stood by Leonie's grave wondering if his killing of Apthone had, after all, been in vain.

DW Myatt
1985

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